

Frontier of the Unknown

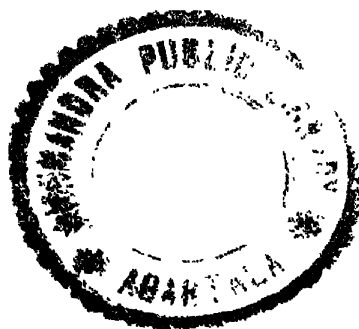
Michel Renoir is a man in his thirties, recently promoted to a position of responsible authority at Damezan, in Languedoc, where on a vast plateau a nuclear power plant is in the process of construction. Such is the confidence of his team in one another, their enthusiasm, their unity in their belief that they are 'the men of the future' that he trusts all confusion of ideas, all friction will be avoided. Stroke by stroke, the author hammers out a vivid impression of this high-powered organization, the stark splendour of the rising piles, the invisible processes within them, the constant danger in spite of ceaseless vigilance of men working on the frontier of the unknown.

Michel is married, with three children. From his days with the *Maquis* he has retained an inclination to violence and a disdain for those who try to live comfortable lives, and has come to regard even his pretty wife Juliette as frivolous and worldly, especially when she rings him up from Paris with her doubts about the hazards of radiation. Pile A, which has been producing plutonium at a satisfactory rate, suddenly breaks down not long after the accident at Windscale, which has set all France speculating on the future of the plant. The hysteria of overwork, suspicion, fear of taking the blame, begin to disrupt the intrepid Michel's life. In his distress he finds support and comfort in the arms of a local schoolmistress. Yet despite his own misgivings, his skill has never been doubted by his team. Pile A is successfully restarted, he is congratulated by his chief both on his dedicated adherence and leadership. Before long Michel and Juliette are reconciled. The reader finds himself the richer for having lived through the many thrilling episodes of this fast-moving story of 'the men of the future'.

Frontier of the Unknown

A NOVEL BY
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TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
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*This novel was written before March,
I dedicate it to the men of goodwill
who are trying to build the future of the
world.*

Part I

I

THE DRIVER OF THE TANKER LORRY, RED MASTODON THAT IT was, had decided not to give way; Michel accelerated, hooted, and hurled his car over to the left. Angrily, the heavy vehicle accelerated in its turn. Its trailer was swinging madly. Still Michel insisted. It was absurd—he was risking his life at every moment; but there could be no question of Michel Renoir, a man of the A.E.C., yielding to a swaggerer. It took him two minutes to catch up with his huge adversary. They came to a hill. Michel trod still harder on the accelerator. Bucking over pot-holes and cracks in the tarmac and almost scraping the trunks of the plane trees, his Vedette left the lorry behind and darted on towards the pine glade crowning the hill.

At the very moment when his face lit up with a smile of triumph, the man felt weariness attacking him. His head was heavy, his back and chest were aching. He remembered that he had had only two hours' sleep since yesterday. He had gone to bed at midnight to make sure of a good night's sleep, but ideas and worries had whirled around in his head. He had even got up to take a shower. Later still, he had telephoned the Centre.

A Maxiton tablet, perhaps? He, a young man and strong, engaged in a superb adventure, was not going to capitulate like that. Enthusiasm—it was enthusiasm that would supply him with its unique and splendid stimulus until the end. He would overcome physical weaknesses whenever he wished. A pioneer does not succumb without first completing his task.

The hillside wheeled past, humming under the swift tyres, and suddenly, like a great bird, the sun rising on the horizon ahead hit the windscreen with full force. A wave of warmth and light struck Michel's eyelids. Instinctively he had begun to brake. The Vedette moved on to the grass and drew up. He opened the door and, to give a shake-up to that great idle body of his which had presumed to think it was tired, got out. He was at his work before

the others every morning : this time he could allow himself five minutes' leisure.

It was not as if this was time taken off from his Great Work : a figure came into Michel's head, and he tore a page from his notebook to jot it down at once. He scribbled some calculations, and reflected. He had lit a cigarette.

Vaguely, like some long empty room, he saw at his feet the robust, yet gentle landscape : all the uprights of the army of vines gilded and reddened by the autumn, all the curves of the river steaming with mist like a wet piece of wood and lined by two columns of trees without a gap. On the distant *garrigues*¹ naked outcrops stood out with, here and there, the white ruins of a castle. Just in front of him there clustered a village, a loose group of deserted gardens and of ancient roofs, Roman tiles the colour of water-melon flesh.

"Speed-merchant, that's what you are ! Show-off ! The little dukes of Damezan must do something to make a splash !"

The silly insults came from the driver of the lorry he had just passed—no doubt one of those alcoholics the Centre had refused to employ as guards. The author of the shouts had stopped his engine and seemed about to get down. Michel shrugged his shoulders and awaited him resolutely. When one has been in the commandos, one knows how to stand one's ground.

The other man had scented danger. This *bourgeois* with the wide forehead and the glasses, a chap over six feet tall and weighing a good twelve and a half stone, didn't look like a flincher. Without another word, the head disappeared into the cabin and the red lorry moved off.

Michel unclenched his fists. He was sorry to have missed the chance of a fight : to give a fool a licking was a meritorious action that would have relieved his tiredness. He lit a second cigarette. A scientist must banish weaker feelings. The incident was closed and that was that.

He was about to start up again when a black roadster shot round the bend, braked and pulled up a few yards away. It belonged to M. Launay, the Director-General of the Damezan

¹ Local name for the rocky hills of Languedoc.

Centre. Michel's astonishment was tempered with vexation, almost as though he had been in the wrong.

M. Launay had got out. He drew off his gloves and took a few stiff steps. Then the two men shook hands in silence : Michel would not have known what to say, and the newcomer was a man of few words.

Bareheaded and with his hair thrown right back to free his forehead, M. Launay, in the bright air of the morning countryside, had still the same stiff deportment he would have had behind his desk with its load of plans. His light blue suit, spare and straight as the body it clothed, seemed made of one piece. No scent of soap or lotion. Not a muscle of his freshly shaved cheeks had moved. The watchful eyes behind his glittering glasses ignored the landscape.

Suddenly he spoke, in his low, precise voice :

"Feeling off colour?"

Michel passed his hand over his face.

"Oh, no, sir."

"Glad to hear that."

Michel felt much relieved. Those few words brought Launay back into character. There had been something improper in the Director-General suddenly taking an interest in the appearance of a human being. How could one have failed to realize that it was the Service he had in mind? No base pity was involved.

And yet . . .

For the fact remained that the directorial car had stopped, contrary to custom. Launay was not a man to go wrong in his intuitions. He had asked a member of his staff about his health and had been answered reassuringly, and yet he did not move. A man who knew the value of every second—obviously he was waiting. His haughty confidence in those who worked under his orders or in association with him in defence of the Cause assured him of a frank avowal : something, somewhere, was certainly wrong.

"Sir . . ." Michel began.

He stopped and was at once sorry he had spoken. As if Launay had ever been seen to encourage anyone to speak !

In any case the closed face became no severer.

"A is still a headache. The pile's working correctly, but I am

not sure enough of—how shall I put it?—of its will to go on with the good work. As you know, my relations with Jean Aubier, my immediate chief, are excellent. I ring him up in Paris every day to give him news of his pile. Every time I complain, he reproaches me for asking too much of what is only matter. He's right. But I only wish we could free ourselves a bit more from this perpetual menace of some unforeseen accident. I'm not expressing myself well, am I? It's extraordinary, what we manage to get out of the pile; it isn't yet extraordinary enough. Do you think I'm being jittery?"

It was strange to empty out at one go one's abstract preoccupations in this way, in the early morning, on a hill-top, amid this austere, pervasive scent of wet earth, resin, and dead leaves. It was like a dream. How could the sudden, silent departure of three carrion crows into the sky on the left have anything whatsoever to do with the chain reaction of the neutrons inside *A*?

The head of Damezan, by the stiffness of his attitude, persisted in denying sun, blue sky and that surrounding countryside abandoned to the charms of autumn. If, for an instant, there had been a sparkle in his eyes as from a secret joy, this was not because they had discovered the mazy meanderings of the Guiche or the stately resignation of the ruined battlements of Roquesabres: such baubles did not exist for them. Michel would have been ready to bet a hundred to one that it was merely because M. Launay's austere mind rejoiced, painfully, in a fresh and fierce struggle against time and against matter and its enigmas.

"Come to my office shortly. Telephone first."

"Certainly, *Monsieur le Directeur*."

They did not shake hands again. The strict man had reached his car and was briskly driving off.

To avoid catching up with the Director's car, Michel had allowed several moments to pass. He was only twelve kilometres from Damezan.

The idea of a meeting with M. Launay, without others present, excited him. He had done well to speak out, to bring the No. 1 at the Centre into the picture. Launay was no specialist in atomic reactors, but his brain soon got the feel of a problem. And, being

the Director, he had the right to know about the worries of his staff.

When, emerging from the Saint-Calixte pass into the valley of the Réguron, Michel caught sight of the familiar outlines and masses on their distant holy plateau, he was seized by an emotion even more ardent than that of the day before, and instinctively he slowed down.

The whole thing was ordered, precise, beautiful and strong, like Truth.

A semicircle of foothills stood out against a background of mountains. And in the foreground, backed by an isolated hill-crest, Damezan completed the composition. Better than any eyrie fortress built by an extortioner of pilgrims in ancient times, the proud group of machine monuments, ousting the *garrigue*, commanded the whole landscape. Commanded the clouds in the sky, the vegetation and the rocks.

In the rigid morning light, those were laws and singing monuments! From the modest pile *A*, standing in front, to the mysterious, nearly completed plutonium factory in the background on the left, and to the giant scaffoldings of *B* and *C* looming up on the right and joined together, what vigour there was in the bonds created by the scientists! A concerto in three movements on the single theme of the purifying exaltation of the forces of matter. The pure uranium from *A* produced the plutonium for the factory to separate in order that, among other uses, it might one day enrich the uranium of *B* and *C*. To the brute matter yielded by the earth's soil the intelligence of a few men was gradually restoring the dazzling strength of the elements of the sun!

One day my son, Michel, will come here, and it will make him happy, thought the atomic scientist with passion. We shall stop here and compare our emotions. I am sure he'll have interesting ideas. The child takes after me. He must take after me.

He thought of his wife . . . and pressed down the accelerator. The whole of this landscape simply dismissed Juliette! Ever since the silly woman had had the audacity, two months ago, just after the accident to the pile at Windscale, to listen to the ridiculous ideas of her friend André Thomas-Laborde, she had ceased to count. She was a pretty woman and no doubt a good mother, but she was no wife for a man of Damezan. She had no

longer any intuition for the violent grandeur of the essential problems. If Damezan remained a closed book to her, so much the worse for her !

Or perhaps so much the better.

As he drove at high speed down the sunlit zigzag descent, Michel glanced from time to time with passionate admiration at the Estate. Admiring the scale of the buildings, reckoning what progress the new construction was making, he always returned to the slender yet sturdy chimney of *A*, rising three hundred feet into the air at the western limit of the Site and resembling some Minoan column in Crete or a giant toadstool pollarded by the mistral. The cycle of operations at Damezan began with pile *A*. In that tall, savage tower he could with justice salute the peak, the first completed work, the symbol of the will to audacity, and the flower—the beautifully monstrous orchid hurled by that futurist composition of concrete, glass and steel as a challenge in the face of the world. For it was a fairy chimney. Wearing the shining necklace of its deflector, whose business it was to prevent harmful exhalations from falling back earthwards, it differed from all the other great chimneys built by men in its possession of an invisible smoke. This enabled it to live from morning till evening and from evening till morning as though motionless, deceptively suggesting some new building abandoned, some millionaire's caprice vainly awaiting use.

Would it be right to attribute this odd quality to the genius of the new energy—so scrupulous that, to define its requirements, the scientists had invented the term 'nuclear purity'? The air which the fairy chimney, with its false appearance of lethargy, returned to the element was not pure, either nuclearly or even chemically. It had been through too many adventures from the time when a noisy suction fan, more than three hundred feet away, had drawn it in, hurled it through a filter and driven it to circulate inside the pile in the thick of the waltz of the atoms. Rushing, as though pursued by a fiend, from top to bottom and from bottom to top of the huge hive, heated, chilled, twisted, compressed, jostled and rebuffed, it had rubbed shoulders with too many mad, obsessed particles, the broth of many kinds of radiation, which could only contaminate everything, for goodness knows how long, with their radioactivity. When at last it escaped,

this invisible air held invisible perils, in spite of the severity of the filter which had searched it at the exit. In its secret properties it was no less different from the healthy air of the mountains than are the long honey-yellow or dust-grey streamers of the chemical works in the suburbs.

Michel remembered what the local peasants had said of it: 'A chimney that never spits is a Devil's chimney.'

So what? It was a peasant's thinking that had also produced the cliché: 'you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.' Even if the invisible exhalation from A's chimney were harmful, the unproven damage that might be done to vineyards, fallow lands and fields of asparagus was not to be compared with the rights conferred on Damezan by its mission. That was so because it was so: and Michel, living on intimate terms with the great problems of the Centre, never troubled to go into more detail about that. He knew that, in the end, Damezan, its machines and technicians, was the stronger. Here lay what was best in France. A nuclear energy centre postulated a centre of moral energy. The great chimney which fools abused represented the ensign of the engineers and the scientists—precise men, sure of what they were doing, who had given battle to the world's reluctance to yield up its secrets. No cruelty, no desire to shock, had a place in their hearts. Each of them lived his life at grips with his own personal scientific problem which was always linked with those of his various colleagues, the sum total converging on one ultimate goal: to succeed as soon as possible in manufacturing nuclear energy at a competitive price, as the overriding interests of a modern country, rich in uranium, demanded.

And already . . . The Vedette had crossed the jade-green stream of the Réguron by an old bridge with rumbling planks. It had executed all the right-angle turns required by its passage through the deserted streets of Saint Marcel-le-Fort. It was about to leave the village and rush up the last hill-side . . . Michel caught sight of a bright blue car drawn up in front of the grocery and tobacco shop. He knew it well. He hooted twice. And in fact 'Plutonium' Martineau was in the act of pushing his way through the bead curtain, his eyes concentrated on a newspaper. He raised his head at the sound of the klaxon, and his small pale face lit up immediately. He waved his hand.

But Michel had been struck by the worried expression on that face, and his pleasure evaporated. How frivolous it was for a man of Damezan to be preparing to celebrate victory, when nothing had yet been decided! Plutonium Martineau, that marvellously balanced brain, set an example to all. Up there, within the sacred precincts, all the problems awaited them. There they were, the real palfreys of the 'dukes of Damezan'—to use the unknown lorry-driver's phrase. The Centre had no time for teaching lessons to the world: it had no doubt of its supremacy, but there was so much work to be done. Every second's delay was serious. At any second, somewhere on this earth which spun without ceasing, carrying with it men who were all the time living, some foreign scientist might announce some tiny discovery from which a group of researchers might draw revolutionary conclusions. And the superhuman efforts of the groups on the point of attaining their aim would be rendered absurd in that second. Oh, the limitations, the delays and the barriers! The barriers. After the sound barrier, the light barrier. The barrier of scientific perplexity. That of the power of reason. That of a single working day. That of this body, which seemed to itself full of vigour.

"Madame Renoir has just rung up from Paris, sir. She would like you to ring her back."

"Did she say what she wanted?"

"No, sir."

Michel was already at his desk. The files and reviews he had taken away last night were back in their drawers, and he had given a rapid glance at his correspondence. Three separate categories: 'of no interest', 'possibly of interest', 'certainly of interest'. As usual, nearly everything went into the first. There were two letters that would be worth close attention.

Madame Vauvert had foreseen each of his movements. When her chief had unfolded the hand-written letter from Muller, an engineer at Saclay, she gave a slight cough.

Michel, who was on the track of an idea, started at the interruption.

"What is it now?" he asked with irritation.

"Shall I call Madame Renoir back?"

"No."

He had lowered his head. The large white sheet of paper shook in his hand. He was sure his secretary approved of his reply, but he wished she had not asked the question. It was the first time that Juliette had allowed herself to ring up the Centre. For a trifle, surely. Otherwise she would certainly have spoken about it to Mme Vauvert. After all, she was not an idiot!

Usually, at the time when this call had come through, Michel was in his office. There was evidently some wisdom that guided events. He had missed his wife's telephone call because it was right that he should.

Mme Vauvert still did not go. Michel raised his head and was about to say something harsh, but restrained himself. The secretary was standing near the door and her face was expressionless. He realized that she would not repeat her question! that she would treat her chief's relations with his wife as a secret concerning the affairs of the Centre. Exactly as though it were a question of some nuclear process. He was grateful. To her and to Damezan. Anyone with experience of the feminine inclination to gossip was bound to admit that nuclear energy improved people.

"What are your instructions, sir?"

"Finish the arrears of typing and do the filing. I'm not in, for anyone. In any case, I'm going over to the pile, and then to Monsieur Launay. When I get back I shall dictate a report."

"Very good, sir."

She had her hand on the door handle behind her, but still she did not go out. She was a young woman with dark hair and dark slits of eyes, who wore ballet shoes and her hair in a pony-tail. Michel liked the lack of symmetry in her face and head. He had read somewhere that this signified intelligence, and he was prepared to agree . . .

"I suppose you want to go before the break this morning," he said disdainfully. "All right, you can."

"Oh, no, sir."

Both of them had blushed. Michel was annoyed.

"I've no time to waste," he cried. "You have children, and I am giving you a quarter of an hour off : that's good news, isn't it?"

Mme Vauvert took two steps forwards, folded her arms and said loudly that she was asking for nothing. Two days ago she had gone off early, because her son had 'flu; but that was exceptional.

"Yes, yes, of course," he stammered. Awkwardly he took out a box of pastilles and offered her one. She hesitated, but then took one. She told herself that the really remarkable men were odd creatures.

"What am I to do if Madame rings again?"

He gave an exaggerated jump, to put his secretary in the wrong.

"I'm not in, for anyone. That was expressed quite clearly, wasn't it?"

"Very well, sir."

"Manage somehow," he added, before the door closed.

A word too many—but Juliette and Mme Vauvert had ceased to matter. The one and only duty was to concentrate on the Problem. To improve the detection system in the reactors, hemming in very closely the realities of their physico-chemical ballet. With his red pencil in his hand, ready to underline the essential words, Michel slowly read the meticulous letter, full of original abbreviations, from his friend Jean Muller. He was smoking. An hypothesis was forming in his mind, trying to find embodiment.

He laid down the pencil. With one elbow on the paper, he took up the telephone.

"Get me Saclay, please. Monsieur Muller."

"Monsieur Muller. One moment, sir," murmured a delicate voice in his ear. One could feel how Mme Vauvert loved the rôle of placing in communication, across space, two of those secret yet real men, who by their dreams were disturbing the shape of the world.

The expected voice came placidly down from the île-de-France to Languedoc.

"Hallo. Renoir?"

"Hallo, old chap. I've got your letter here. Are you sure of all the figures?"

"Don't you like 'em? Would you like some prettier ones?"

"Come off it!"

"Sorry to disappoint you, the figures are correct."

"I shall go by them. Thanks. You'll be hearing from me. Don't let up. We're on to something."

He had rung off. Behind the partition Mme Vauvert disengaged the line. She did not know what the two men had

been discussing, but was amazed by how quick they had been.

Michel had set to work on some difficult calculations. He shifted in his chair. This was life, in the true sense of the word! His head was clear as a fine June sky, and he could easily have given thanks to the difficulty for always rising again, long and sinuous, whenever he thought he had got the better of it . . . He would have the last word! Muller's figures glowed on his desk like pearls.

In this atmosphere of harsh, pure work, one's senses grew sharper. Suddenly the telephone rang. Michel was just about to pick up the receiver when he realized that he was mistaken—it was in Mme Vauvert's office that it was ringing. He heard a "Hallo?" Was it Muller again, perhaps? With even more surprising figures? He waited for a full minute. He could hear his secretary uttering two or three sentences, but could not distinguish a word.

Juliette? He brought a furious fist down among the sheets of papers he was using for his calculations. The boring woman . . . The silly goose . . . Vauvert—the excellent Vauvert—had got rid of her; but to think that, twice in twenty minutes, she had dared encumber one of the Damezan telephone lines with her stupid voice! Were the thick barbed-wire fences surrounding the Centre not enough, then, to keep out all the busybodies?

He put his hands up to his head. The fine hypothesis which he had been pursuing for some time had made off like a sparrow. His head was throbbing . . . Was he behaving too harshly to Juliette? No, no, no! At Damezan they were dealing with the country's future, the future of France with all her cities and industries and that flood of young people who must be brought in—as many of them as possible—to the conquest of a true scientific civilization. A man who has an appointment this very morning with someone like M. Launay deserves to have not a single one of his moments frittered away.

He stood up and opened the window. The image of Jean Aubier came into his mind and gradually consoled him. That was the superior calm to which one ought to attain. Even if it was to some extent deceptive, and even if one had to suffer a great deal to acquire it. Aubier was married: just like Michel Renoir, he

had three children, children whom he had wanted and whose education he watched closely, for he was a man who could neglect nothing; and yet, when on service, he never gave a sign of any personal worries. One would have thought his feet hardly touched the ground.

Michel bent over towards his desk. Quickly he wrote in ink in his engagement book : '13.00 Ring J'.

J. was obviously Juliette, but Mme Vauvert would not understand.

He smoothed down his hair and went out.

2

IT WAS AUTOMATIC : AS SOON AS HE OPENED THE DOOR A SORT of puff of disquiet struck him in the face. He stopped dead. He didn't like that. But behind the desk the man he had come to see, the engineer in charge of pile A, had stood up with a broad smile, and was now advancing towards him with his hand outstretched.

I must be projecting a merely personal feeling on to the outside world, Michel told himself instantly. He sniffed. No, he really did scent something abnormal.

"How goes it?" asked Jacques Bousso.

A grimace was the only reply. Michel was thinking that the heat would be enough to account for the atmosphere of uneasiness. In these closed-in rooms and galleries the excessive heat went to one's head. It got in the way of one's movements. It made one sweat . . . The explanation seemed plausible in a place that existed to celebrate the all-powerfulness of matter.

If so, wariness was still justified ! The heat that impregnated one's clothes, body and ideas in this place was not provided by the usual means. Its source, not many yards away in the same building, was the reactor core, that formidable flameless hearth, which would have liberated a great deal more heat, but for the air and water ceaselessly circulating. If anyone could have analysed its workings, he would have found the stubbornness, rancours and rages of a hemmed-in energy.

Michel shook hands with Jacques. Before shutting the door he listened carefully to the din of the blower, which sounded as violent as usual.

"I'm just going to see Launay," he said as he sat down. "I propose to talk to him for a few moments about the anxieties I've already explained to you. Don't worry, I shall water it down. But I shall feel cleaner after I've spoken. The working of the pile is too important for us to keep him in the dark : he may not be able to change anything merely by his scientific views, but he is the Director of the Centre, and he's responsible even, to some extent, for our unconscious reactions and for what we think about him—even if it's not correct."

Jacques was drumming softly with his finger-tips on his wide clear desk. He was frowning and looking away towards the window.

Michel could not help smiling ; he thought he knew what words would set his colleague's mind at rest.

"Of course," he went on, "I shall ring up Aubier immediately after and give him the gist of our conversation."

The frown disappeared in a second. Jacques was looking at Michel again, and his whole face expressed pleasure. He was fond of Michel and respected his perfectionist standards and his strength of will : he would have been proportionately distressed at seeing him act disloyally. Aubier had created the pile. Aubier was Michel's direct chief. It was in his name, therefore, that the two men were meeting in this office, early this morning. No rivalries here ! Even if the reactor went wrong, and very seriously, that would matter less than would a failure of co-ordination in the work. Face to face with the compactness and silence of matter, technicians should close their ranks.

"The three of you," he declared in ringing tones, "will certainly manage to get even with the problem."

"You mean the four of us !" answered Michel, pointing at him.

Jacques lowered his eyes. Such an expression of confidence, man to man, made one of those moments that render long gruelling days worth while.

"What am I thinking of?" his friend went on. "There are five of us. I was forgetting Martineau—how could I ? That man contrives to help us, by his sheer cunning, in a special field that

isn't his own. And of course he keeps closer on our heels than a whole regiment of creditors. Every time I meet him I get the same shock. I can read in his eyes the words : 'Hurry up, brother.' His factory's going up fast. We absolutely must meet him at the *rendezvous*. With all the provisions we promised to bring."

Boussoit laughed : Martineau, who knew how to relax, would have enjoyed the comparison with a picnic.

"Shall we go?" asked Michel, getting up.

A few seconds later the two men emerged into the corridor. Their faces had become stern. They were on the alert.

Control Room.

The meticulous order of a modern museum. The silence of a ship's bridge or a lookout tower.

For it is there, beyond the shield. This morning, as yesterday evening, it is showing perfect obedience, and its masters may consider that obedience as its normal condition.

They may not, though, forget its instincts of violence! No one has ever found the exact causes, but already it has often happened that storms of neutrons have broken out, one or more of the uranium rods have blazed up and, yielding to the excessive temperature, their magnesium cans have developed leaks. The pile has had to be stopped, to prevent fire and poisonous exhalations from spreading. And the replacement of the rods has meant the loss of many days. There has been danger from radioactivity. Tricky operations have had to be carried out. The restarting has been necessarily slow . . . And yet it is a common accident, comparable to the bursting of a tyre—and the whole French production of plutonium has been stopped short . . . That superb and mysterious factory of Martineau's, which threatens to be ready soon—will those chemical palaces have cost us so many millions to build, only to remain empty?

Certainly all the dials and charts in this room are none too many. A vast system of electronic espionage converges here, with its heaps of dispatches announcing the latest events in the pile more quickly than the most feverish teleprinters. Every one of the two thousand three hundred uranium rods is a zone of particular uneasiness, contained by its individual network of vigilance, revealing its temperature at every instant and allow-



ing on demand—a routine inspection that gets round to it every three-quarters of an hour—an estimate of its radioactivity. Nothing that happens in the depths of *A* is a matter of indifference. Its *mêlée* of particles—so much more complicated than the tracer bullets in a night battle or the phosphorescent magic in the waters of a lagoon—must be ordered and illuminated by men's minds if they do not want some disorder to emerge and take them by surprise.

There are some fifteen men in this precinct. Some of them are probationers from Saclay, who have come here to have life put into their theoretical studies. But each of them, as well as each of the representatives of the Centre, keeps to his precise place. No one speaks. Michel and Boussot brush past several pairs of shoulders, shake hands now and then with someone, but do not utter a word. Coming in from outside, they are aware that the tension in them is not yet in tune with this place. A mediocre phrase might destroy in an instant long hours of a man's work.

This suspicious supervision of matter is as deserving of respect as a musician's practising.

Having finished the general inspection, Michel went and stood behind Labarsouques, who was sitting at the central desk with his eyes on a chronometer.

He was now ready to ask—in a low voice—a question. He still had in mind the telephone call he had received two days before. Since Boussot had given notice that he was going to the theatre that evening, it was Michel whom Labarsouques had rung up in his lodging at Nouvillargues at about eleven o'clock. One of the rods was getting hot; its index of radioactivity was threatening to reach the frontier beyond which the safety regulations decreed that the pile should be stopped. Since the next examination would not take place for three-quarters of an hour, what ought to be done?

The engineer had no need to go into detail. He was simply asking for orders. And Michel had remained silent. Stop the reactor as a precaution? Reduce its power? A monster image of the face of Plutonium Martineau rose before him, one eye full of fear, the other of anger. Michel had asked several questions, and had concluded: 'Wait.' Then he had rung off. For a full hour he had expected the telephone to ring again and Labarsouques to announce the rupture of one of the cans.

As it turned out, since the rod had calmed down by itself, the event had proved him right . . . There are ways of being right that produce uneasiness rather than relief.

Michel laid his hand on Labarsouques' shoulder. The man did not raise his head. The second-hand of his chronometer moved on, silent and alive, like a radar beam exploring space. Each packet of time was increasing measurably the pile's reserve of plutonium. . . . It seemed better once more to say nothing, to disturb nothing.

Michel made a sign to Boussot, and the two friends moved towards the door.

A few steps along a gallery, a few doors pushed open, and already they had penetrated into the reactor hall—the 'nave'—and were face to face with one of the concrete flanks of the enormous pile. A luminous dial welcomed them, throwing at them the figure 38: the reactor was working at its full cruising power—thirty-eight thousand kilowatts per hour (forty thousand had been the original figure, but for reasons of security Aubier had preferred not to attempt that figure). It was very hot. The windows let in a bright pale light. There was every reason to suppose that, beyond them, there extended the open air and that the wind, playing with space, was rushing across the depths of the sky; but physically one felt far away from the world.

Where was one? In some subterranean market? In the bowels of some strange ship? From time to time a man, just like the men of the outer world, came in sight or disappeared—a silent technician at grips with his problem. For a brief moment, as he opened the door, the raging din of the blower became audible. The enigma remained master.

Human beings, certainly, had dug the foundations, built the walls and completed the roofing-in of this hall; had created, assembled, poured in and raised up in the middle of it the materials of that giant cairn of modern times, that machine-monument, which they controlled and supervised by dint of their own ingenuity, enriching it with air, water and electric current and tying it to thousands of recording instruments. And yet, though it obeyed and measured its submission precisely, the work had escaped them. Matter had found itself anew, all of a sudden, in these new forms which it had been asked to don.

Cruelly phlegmatic, it had taken possession of them as the light of a torch takes possession of an empty well, and now the feeling of its sepulchral and sovereign power filled the nave. It had established itself even in that massive heat, the fermentation of rocks.

How far it was true that the pile, around which the two colleagues were slowly walking, had become a wild and terrible creation of nature? Like, in some abyss, an enormous mushroom of lava accumulated by the work of tens of thousands of years.

Coming to a stop in front of the east face of the pile, Michel and Jacques once more examined that marquetry pattern, the charge face. No change. Flush with the pearl-grey concrete, into which they seemed sealed like wax stoppers, the end-caps closing the magnesium cans—over a thousand large, impeccably round breech-blocks—rose, forming an elegant octagon of regular terraces. An illustration for school text books: the hive of electro-chemical forces and masses. 'The diligent neutrons streaming through the thick darkness of the uranium elements—were not these too helping to make honey?—the honey that would come into flower on the periphery of these rods, against their cans. A honey called plutonium; the marvellous, the monstrous, the indispensable plutonium.

So far so good. But what thread of Ariadne could intuition seize hold of, to enable the intellect to wind its way inside all this accumulation of opacities, to discover its laws, like the tracks of some great wild beast?

Michel's eye came to rest with special interest on three oxblood red caps which stood out from one of the lower rows of the octagon. They were new ones, he recognized. That was the sector of the last accident. One fine afternoon, three rods had nearly begun to burn. Aubier had been at the Centre. It had taken him and Boussot no more than five minutes to master the situation.

All the same, when it was all over, it had taken a fortnight to get back to normal working.

But Jacques was turning towards him.

"That reminds me," he murmured. "I'm told you rang up last night. Did . . . ?"

He fell silent, with a vague gesture.

Michel looked at him. He, too, was not anxious to go into detail.

"You got a satisfactory report."

And suddenly he walked on. Imperceptibly he had begun to walk on tiptoe. He was keeping down the sound of his footsteps. As though with the idea of surprising a malefactor . . . Someone was coming towards them with rapid steps. A small fat man, bald in front. With a pinched smile, he was doing in his head a calculation with three unknown quantities, and he passed them without even noticing. It was Loisel, a young probationer, specialist in neutrons, who was pursuing a line of secret experiments.

The south flank. Its plain carapace of reinforced concrete. After the hive, the blockhouse.

Why was Michel going on with this? As if he did not know that, to the evidence of the senses, a pile was practically indecipherable. The caps which he had thought it his duty to examine specially, like a scar, mocked his eyes and his fears. If more cans burst, they might be the same ones again, or they might just as well be others. Visual examination was absolutely powerless.

A tamer of wild beasts is never completely helpless, even in the cage of the most capricious of them. He interprets a roar, an expression of the face, a lashing of the tail . . . But the nuclear reactor gives out no smell of its own. It utters no cry. Although it is the seat of an intense bombardment of particles, in appearance it never trembles or rocks or moves in any way : it offers to the senses simply a stubborn image of mineral stagnation, of enormous immobility.

The curious presumption of trying to study *A* from the nave ! Was it not as though a warder, fearing a revolt among his prisoners, should consider the high enclosing wall from outside ?

Michel would not have gone for this walk with anyone but Jacques.

Five years earlier, meeting him at one of the last Parisian evening parties to which Juliette had dragged him (the two men were not dancing and had fallen into conversation), he had known intuitively that he was worthy of a share in the great adventure. He had asked him, point-blank, to give up his railways and join the Authority. Jacques had not hesitated. Ever since

the Liberation—to be exact, ever since he read a certain phrase from a speech by President Truman the day after Hiroshima, to the effect that the forces from which the sun gets its power have been liberated against the men who brought war to the Far East—it had been a private passion of his to follow atomic questions. He was a fervent Christian. In his view, science and faith agreed marvellously, but he trembled with horror at the thought of the cesspool into which human malignity threatened to change so many admirable talents. Since France had decided to concentrate on the non-military uses of nuclear energy, he felt it would be wrong not to respond to an appeal which seemed heaven-sent.

Jacques had indeed had no more than two years in which to familiarize himself with his new field. Aubier, who from the first day had adopted him and, seeing in this new disciple the future chief engineer of *A*, had summoned him to the plateau of Damezan, which the Authority had just purchased : a *garrigue* of holm-oaks, brambles and vines gone to seed, where there were still a few crumbling walls. The two men had shared the thousand changes of fortune that accompany a construction at its start, the thousand problems set by the small changes which execution imposes on a design, while the pile planned by Aubier and his team rose before their eyes. At zero hour, on a given day decided on by the men at the top, *A* had officially started work, letting loose its first streams of neutrons, and at the same moment, on paper, Aubier, its creator, had abandoned his pile in favour of Jacques. Strong in the experience gained, he had passed on to the construction of *B* and *C*, reactors that were to be far more powerful. But reality, as always, failed to respect the official time table. As long as a pile had not started work, it was still only an extremely complicated aggregate of materials : in reality it did not exist. What cruelty, or what aberration, could have insisted that the man who had conceived it in order that it might work should let himself be deprived of it at the very first second in which life, full-blooded and terrible, leapt up in the midst of that mass, disturbing it like flesh? The ceremony of inauguration could not interrupt either Aubier's rights or his duties. For a long time—for as long as necessary—he and Jacques would have to follow the functioning of their pile side by side, together getting to know—each for himself but also through the other's mind—

this being, which one of them had caused to be built and had intended to hand over to the other as his own.

For (and this was not the least troubling feature) the two who pulled the strings had to make terms with a third owner, a singularly vigorous, strapping third. Whenever, by some turn in the conversation, the two men came to feel that they were on the point of alluding to him, they retreated, not wishing to waste their courage. Such tacit agreements are inevitable between pioneers . . . But they knew. They knew that two men are not necessarily the real masters of a pile, simply because they can set it going or stop it, or because an amazingly subtle and multiple network of electronic indicators informs them about every detail of its existence that may seem worth knowing.

Aubier's place, this morning, was being taken by Renoir. But the combination of Renoir and Boussot reacted in the same way. This was precisely the problem on which Michel's attention and imagination were concentrating furiously.

Did the first room into which they had gone deserve its name? Control room : yes—with certain reserves. But as long as it could not also be called the 'prediction room', human authority over the pile must recognize its limits.

At any moment, within the four walls of this nave which was meant to be its prison, the behaviour of the nuclear reactor might defeat vigilance. Human hand and thought had chosen and assembled the elements of that enormous block, but at any given moment things were happening which suggested that the energies, set free within its mass and immediately disciplined, had been scheming to escape from this discipline and to gain autonomy. Like a ferret with ambitions to go out on its own. Or a revolution burning to run away from its leaders . . . There had been every chance to observe that flare-up of forces in its mineral darkness when it had been set to work and when, with a thousand precautions, the critical mass was approached. Fermi's reactor, all the American, Russian, Canadian and British reactors, had known, at their birth, that same frantic enthusiasm of matter, that same stealthy will to deviate and to push revolt too far; but what was the good? The difficulties encountered by others did not make the problem any less serious.

The essential mission and *raison d'être* of A, as the first French

pile in industrial use, were to produce plutonium, an element with an extraordinary energy-potential. But what did plutonium mean to the general public? It had never been seen on the normal market for chemical elements. And in the laboratories? Not there, either. It had needed the year 1940 to make science discover this transuranian element with the atomic number 94, and the first French milligram of plutonium, isolated in 1949, had never left its sheltered birthplace . . . Whereas in the most remote hamlet everyone knew, or thought they knew, electricity.

Anxious not to disappoint the general public, the men who had thought up and built the pile had therefore laid stress on one of its secondary purposes, the transformation of nuclear energy into electrical energy. *A* would supply current to the national grid. Very little; but still there would be men reading newspapers, women ironing, harbours lit with fairy lanterns, kilometres of rails covered by locomotives, because x neutrons had hurled themselves about among the uranium rods. With this in view the technicians had attached to the pile a small 'out of doors' generating plant, elegant and gracious like a Japanese garden . . . Hum! As regards consuming electric current, the pile fulfilled expectations exactly: but as regards supplying it, it played the innocent, whom people have forgotten to consult, and made hay of the calculations. Working at 40 it would theoretically have guaranteed a production of 5,000 kilowatts, at 38 it delivered no more than a ridiculous trickle of 3,000. And even that was lucky!

Aubier, Renoir and their brains trust had come round to the view that gas-cooled reactors would be better adapted to a transformation of heat into electricity. Reactors, also, in which the shape of the rods had been modified . . . Even if they managed to profit by it, the fact remained that they had suffered a defeat. Michel could not forget this. His was a fighter's temperament which, far from being worn down by combat, is provoked by it. To limit this invisible third power. To limit this unknown liberty—and, in using that adjective 'unknown', was one not giving the enemy his correct name?

The unknown . . .

Outsiders reason as though its field runs along the borders of the known, which is envisaged as a territory with a single owner.

An erroneous conception! The unknown lurks also within the known and carries on a fierce partisan warfare against its rear.

A telephone rang. Jacques moved towards the receiver which lurked shyly in a corner.

"Hallo."

His face, which had grown anxious, cleared and acquired a strange smile.

"It's for you," he said to his companion.

Michel went over, worried in his turn. He did not like receiving calls in the impressive nave, a few yards away from the pile, whose giant silence seemed to be spying on him.

"Hallo?"

"Monsieur Renoir? It's Madame Vauvert."

"Shall I take the call here? Or would you prefer me to go to Monsieur Bousso's office?"

"No, no, sir, it's not worth it."

She gave a low laugh, whose kindness Michel did not like. The best of secretaries sometimes took pleasure in passing on disquieting news.

"Monsieur Launay has just rung up. I told him you were at the pile, but he said that made no difference."

Yes, when one is the head of Damezan one is always in a hurry. Too much even to put through a second call.

"He can't see you now. He would like you to ring again this afternoon. He wants you to keep at least an hour clear for him. He has a great deal to say to you."

Michel went over again in his mind this morning's scene in the country. "Come to my office shortly," was all that the directorial voice had said then. That meant a twenty minutes' interview at most, in which Michel would have done most of the talking.

Why this change of programme? Had Launay heard of Juliette's telephone call? Why should that concern him? Would he take an interest in such petty details?

Nothing commonplace could enter into the conduct of a man like Launay.

"Listen carefully, Madame Vauvert . . ."

Michel had lowered his voice.

"Have you given me Monsieur Launay's exact words?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good . . ."

He knew he was showing weakness, was wasting time—but already it was too late . . .

"As we're on the subject of telephone calls, you haven't had one from my wife?"

"As a matter of fact Madame Renoir has rung up. I answered as you told me . . ."

She paused. Michel could hear her breathing. Ashamed he muttered : "Very good." And hung up the receiver.

Jacques had discreetly moved away. When Michel rejoined him he asked no questions. But he could see the signs of worry on his friend's face.

Side by side, the two men considered the western face of the pile. The hive again. Again the end-caps of the fuel cans. The machine-monument loomed up silently like a vast cloudy sky. The motionless forest of the enemy country, over which the reconnaissance plane flies at a great height.

"A change," said Michel at last, still contemplating the octagon formed by the rows of rods. "I'm not having my talk with Launay until later today, but it will be a longer one."

In the distance a door opened allowing the din of the blower to flood into the nave; then it closed again and there was silence. A silence which stopped nothing : at every moment the predicted events—and certain others—were going forward inside the pile with Balkan fury.

"I think we . . ."

Jacques did not trouble to finish the sentence : his friend was bound to understand.

Neither nuclear reactors nor their technicians are talkative.

And in fact Michel was moving quietly towards the stairs as if, without previous notice, Jacques had given the signal by wireless.

One after another the two men climbed the grey steps, bare as a marble. Their departure was an extremely calm one, nothing like flight. Their tiring inspection had not been a waste of time.

To drag its secrets out of the pile by the *n*th examination of its outward form was an apparently unreasonable thing to attempt, yet it could be explained, and it concealed a second objective, not to be put into words. It was the same ruse as that used by the Japanese army, when it sent out a wave of low-flying aircraft, all doomed to destruction, in order to distract attention from the real high-flying attack. Here was the truth : that invisible bombardment by the innumerable particles spurting from the uranium rods and hurtling about behind the graphite and concrete had been answered by the invisible bombardment of ideas. Between the men and the pile there had taken place a strange, obstinate, difficult, two-way osmosis. For there did also exist intellectual radiations. These were sharp and formidable—and even more secret than the material ones. How would man ever have been able to affect the world if his spirit had not contained, as part of its nature, the means of defeating every form of obstacle and penetrating every kind of night?

From the unconscious minds of the two spectators something had leapt into the interior of the pile.

In front of the door of Jacques' office Michel stopped and passed his hand over his forehead.

"Is your family well?" he asked.

"All right, thank you." -

They were hardly thinking of what they were saying. The fan made the air quiver. Somewhere a typewriter was clicking out its official letter. And meanwhile, down there in the thick of *A*, the silent explosions were feverishly continuing. Uranium 235 was undergoing fission, uranium 238 was changing into plutonium.

Suddenly Renoir yawned and rested his back against the wall.

"Like to come in and sit down for a second?" said his companion.

"Another time."

He had already pulled himself together. Fatigue would not stop him from doing what he had decided to do. He would simply have preferred to feel in better form for dictating to Mme Vauvert a five-page report.

The first sentence was already shaping itself in his mind. He knew the word 'plutonigenous' would have a place in it. Right

at the beginning. For it was through plutonium that he would get the key to the problem.

3

MICHEL WAS SHOUTING IN THE TELEPHONE BOX. HALF AN hour to get through to Auteuil 02-33—it was a scandal. “Don’t you realize, mademoiselle, that we have priority? P for pressure, R for resistance, I for . . . Don’t, please, tell me there’s been a storm! The mistral, mademoiselle, is an attitude of mind . . .”

Impossible to make the little idiot see sense. He came out muttering. Half an hour to repair a line, when light goes round the world several times in a second . . .

Suppose he cancelled the call? Juliette could wait! To think that she had dared to disturb Damezan this morning, twice in succession. Even then it would have been more, had she not had an appointment with her coiffeur—sorry, ‘artist in hair’!

Let’s give her one more chance.

As he glanced down the long and noisy dining-room, Michel felt a sharp disappointment: he could not see Labarsouques anywhere. Though he had come here resolved to explain, once for all, the answer he had given the other evening. Things seemed determined to go wrong.

From various sides people called to him and offered to make room for him, but he preferred to sit down on the first empty chair he saw, which was on the central gangway. Two tables away Martineau was engaged in an animated discussion with Josquin, head of the Graphite Department, who was scientifically peeling a red apple. Michel might have joined them, but he was afraid of gravitating into talking shop and he wanted, between a heavy morning and an equally heavy afternoon, to allow himself an hour’s relaxation. But for that, he would have stayed and had lunch in the canteen at the Centre instead of coming all the way to Nouvillargues.

There was, in fact, a certain charm in the youthful atmosphere of this mess, where the different scientific schools fraternized.

This midday rest only *seemed* to make a break in research : in reality the laughter and joking enabled the subconscious mind, free from supervision, to work on, with a mad fervour, at the problem.

Michel had just, in a single second, mapped out the two calls he would put through—one of them to Aubier that afternoon the other to Labarsouques that evening when he was back in the control room.

But now came another disappointment. He had placed himself, unsuspectingly, in a group consisting of three young men, all plutonium specialists, who had arrived that morning at Damezan for a stay of a month or two and were chattering gaily about the possibility of sending Brigitte Bardot into space by special sputnik. This would be called 'Operation Return to the Moon' or 'Operation Young Lady's Education'. When, wishing to join in, he introduced himself, his name caused a silence to fall and, like a burst balloon of gold-beater's skin, the poor actress instantly vanished into sidereal space.

The young man with fair hair whose seat was next to Michel's, had turned towards him. He was slightly dandified, with a fancy handkerchief and a thin moustache, and it suited him.

"Are you . . . Michel Renqir? Jean Aubier's No. 2?"

"Yes."

The other frowned, and his Adam's apple went up and down. In desperation he picked up the basket which stood next to his neighbour's magic glass.

"Would you like some bread?"

Michel helped himself, suppressing a bitter smile. He would not have minded the young man's excessive courtesy. It was that confidence, that admiration for the men at the top . . .

The mutual esteem shown by the various Services at Damezan and at Saclay and throughout the Authority was in fact painfully oppressive. Apart from Aubier, Boussot and Launay, Michel could not have confided his difficulties to anyone without being interrupted. 'What? A Renoir, Aubier's No. 2 brought up short by a problem? A leg-pull! The reactors would obey him whenever he gave them an order.'

Yes, even Martineau would have refused to believe him. And yet Martineau had a level head.

A hand was laid on Michel's shoulder and he turned round. Cahuzac, the head of Security, had just gone by—a tall man with fair hair and blue eyes—looking for a place with his usual enigmatic mildness. But the reactor specialist was struck by a detail : those pink cheeks, looking as if they had had a buffeting, suggested a recent contretemps. Cahuzac must have just had some trouble.

Josquin had stood up. He had finished and was calling to Cahuzac to offer him his chair. Martineau shook hands with the head of Security, and must immediately have made some joke, for the newcomer's face melted into a huge smile. Dear Martineau, that admirable man . . . But suddenly Cahuzac bent forward and muttered something, and the other frowned. They looked in Michel's direction.

Aubier's No. 2 thought it best to lower his eyes and make a prosaic attack on the *hors-d'œuvre* which the waitress had just brought. A slice of ham—of a nuclear purity—beautiful as one of Josquin's slabs of graphite. It was useless to plunge into fresh worries : the Problem was quite enough, and for an hour the unconscious must take charge of that. The young people at the table had got on to Judo. An excellent theme for intellectual relaxation.

Besides, incontestably, Martineau's presence in the room was a guarantee of calm. Waves or radiations of optimism emanated from that man, who bore on his shoulders crushing responsibility, and whose whole life was now identified with the vindication of plutonium, a chemical element dangerous above all others, explosive and toxic to the last degree.

If the cycle of industrial operations at Bamezan began with the difficulties of *A*, it seemed destined to continue with a second stage of the greatest serenity.

Which brought one back to this : that Michel must solve his Problem.

In these fibrils of ham lay hidden atoms. Galaxies of invisible reality. My knife, like an earthquake, separates continents.

"Monsieur Renoir, may I have a word with you outside?"

It was Iturribe, the tall Basque in charge of Public Relations.

Michel rose and followed him.

Worried? The newcomer's inexpressive face seemed cheerful. He might be pretending. Michel had mobilized all his alertness.

Outside the dining-room the two men walked on for a few steps and stopped near a door leading to the garden.

"I know, Monsieur Renoir, you are seeing Monsieur Launay shortly. I imagine you know what your interview will be about. Am I being indiscreet?"

"You're a clairvoyant," Michel replied, feeling uneasy. And automatically he lit a cigarette.

"A clairvoyant who simply listens," rejoined the other. "Monsieur Launay had a long conversation with Paris this morning. He was officially informed—I repeat, officially—of the construction of three reactors in the fairly near future, somewhere else—not at Damezan."

Michel's nostrils quivered. This confidence seemed to him an obvious trick. He would have liked to ask a certain question, but honour forbade it.

"You astonish me, considerably," he said coldly. "The building programme you mention was decided on a long time ago."

"You must be mistaken." Iturribe was smiling oddly. One could feel that he did not think what he had just said, but did not care.

There was a long silence. Michel, who had turned away and was pretending to look out into the garden, kept telling himself that the man was executing an order given him by Launay. Only—how far did he guess the meaning of the part he was playing? Was it to spur him on or to rebuke him?

On two separate occasions, in conversations in Paris, Aubier's No. 2 had received unsolicited assurances that he would be promoted before long to an even more important post. Had the time come? Didn't this mean, rather, that someone else had been chosen?

At length Iturribe looked at his watch.

"My God!" he muttered with more or less sincerity. "Excuse me, I must be off. See you this evening. Forgive me for interrupting your lunch."

He opened the door and went down the steps outside. He had left his car under the trees. He had arranged to lunch with Boussoit in the canteen at the Centre.

Michel had sat down in one of the chairs in the hall. Was it possible that the haughty Launay, who had such respect for the

value of time, should have sent a man like Iturribe out of his way—all the way from Damezan to Nouvilargues—simply for the pleasure of disquieting a colleague? On scientific grounds, all personal pride apart, everything indicated that Paris intended Michel to have charge of building and starting up the reactors about which Launay had been advised that morning.

As though such a judgment settled everything! Had a man with an unsolved Problem the right to allow his name to be associated, from today, with a tremendous future enterprise?

He stood up. Every moment was important—more than ever. But before he had reached the door of the dining-room, Plutonium Martineau came out and stood facing him, smiling. The two men shook hands. Martineau's handshake, precise and firm, suggested the idea of nuclear purity.

"I'm not forgetting you, I never *shall* forget you," said Michel, with excessive emphasis. He was already, hurriedly, disengaging himself, when he was stopped by a "Hey!"

"If Monsieur Renoir will do me the honour of coming to our department late this afternoon, we shall receive him there with joy. Joking apart, we've an operation on that may interest you. Try and be free."

"We'll try. Because we're idiots. And then you'll pester me a bit more with your plutonium."

Martineau laughed:

"My'—but it's yours!"

Michel jumped. "Why, yes," he stammered. "Perhaps you're right. I'd never thought of it."

"Right? Of course I am," said Martineau, still laughing. "Of course I am. You're the midwife and I the governess. To think that people take Michel Renoir for a serious person."

The No. 2 to Aubier—to the new Aubier of the three reactors beside which *A*, *B* and *C*, if not *D* and *E*, would look like a Dion-Bouton next to a Bugatti—ate his meal at full speed, with his eyes on his plate. He did not hear his young neighbours talking of their holidays under canvas.

Nor did he hear the waitress who came in search of him: he was wanted on the telephone. She had to touch his arm.

He almost ran to the door. It must be Launay calling him, to give chapter and verse for what Iturribe had told him.

In the hall a second waitress said the word 'Paris' as he passed. It was even more solemn, then : it was the Authority itself ringing up to inform him . . .

"Did you want Auteuil 02-33? You're through to it, caller."

What a bad idea it had been to act on the note in his engagement diary ! Fancy—at a moment when he was being summoned to such great things—falling into some business about a maid stealing the linen, or a room that needed repainting . . .

"Are you there? Is that you, Michel?"

He ground his teeth.

"Yes, it's me."

At the same time he felt ashamed of his anger and of having to try to restrain it.

"Hallo, *mon chou*, are you all right?"

Oh, these rustic terms of endearment ! Why not '*mon lapin*' ? To think that, during this time, the building programme for the reactors was being worked out. Inside *A*, uranium 235 was undergoing fission and 238 was . . .

"I'm well, and I hope you are, but I'm in a hurry. Is it urgent?"

A silence. His roughness was not appreciated. The urgency of French independence in the matter of energy resources was not suspected. Too bad. The importance of Damezan was of a quite different order from that of the furnishings in the Faubourg Saint Honoré : calmly he repeated his question.

A tired voice answered : "Why get angry before I've even spoken?"

He muttered that he was not angry, but was in a terrible hurry; that—well, he had two minutes to spare. As he said so, he noted the time on his wrist watch.

There was a sigh at the other end. An ostentatious one. Then a low voice said :

"It's about Michel. Don't be annoyed when I tell you he's failed in his examination a fortnight ago, and has had to go back to the same form again. I didn't dare tell you immediately."

The man realized, with a pang, that there was room in him, in spite of the crushing splendour of his Problems, for other interests. The failure of his son Michel was real also—discon-

certing and humiliating. It was a thing as definite as the first drop of rain at the beginning of a storm.

"Well?" he stammered, as though he had forgotten that he must cut the conversation short at all costs.

"As it makes things difficult for Michel with the boys he was with before, I was wondering if you'd agree to our putting him into some private school, where I think I can get him admitted to the top form."

"What? What? A private school?"

"Yes."

"I refuse."

The trick was obvious, wasn't it? But he was not going to be taken in. It was impossible to think that Michel junior was a dunce. Not with such parents. There was himself, and as for Juliette—she had given up only three years ago, up to then she had had leanings towards science. What could have happened? Juliette must have taken no interest in the boy's examination. Secretly she had wanted him to fail. A boy at the *lycée* no longer suited her 'standing' . . . In the daughter of a Member of Parliament (U.D.S.R.) such conduct was almost laughable. And to think that she went to Mass once a year (which was once more than her husband) . . . No, no, no: Michel should never go to one of those terrible schools—his father did not know them, but was sure that the boys were taught nothing but Caesar and Livy in the middle of the twentieth century, at the moment when the physical and chemical sciences were making their fantastic advances. A man breathing the air of his own time—that is what he must become. A technician, like his father. Like Martineau. Like Aubier. A man grasping the real by its mane.

"Listen, *mon chou*. Let me explain. Janson's children are talking—there's no shutting them up. I assure you, if you were here . . ."

"Sorry, the two minutes are up. I'll ring you back this evening."

"Very well."

"*Au revoir!*"

She made no answer. Disappointed, in spite of himself, he waited for a few seconds. He knew she had not hung up the receiver. But to hell with women's sulks! He growled and banged down the receiver.

"Mon cher ami . . ."

There was no possible doubt : the words came from M. Launay, the Director of the Centre, beyond the long desk. He was speaking in the stiff, slow, apparently professorial voice of a man who detests speech-making precisely because he respects the value of every word.

The word '*ami*' had been uttered clearly. Coming from a mouth that scarcely ever had occasion to use it, it was certainly pronounced deliberately and became once more a great word, implying, to begin with, a solidarity in sacrifice as between the two human beings whom it linked together.

Dazzled, Michel had lowered his eyes. The Director had joined his slender, vigorous hands on the brightly polished surface of the desk. They suggested a man unarmed and serene. The telephone—which had been put to so much use since that morning—had been pushed aside and the notebook closed. The interview was evidently to be long and serious.

"I am not speaking to you as your superior in the hierarchy. The whole of Damezan is under me, and since your work at present brings you here I am aware what conclusions the outsider would draw; but as for me, in Aubier's assistant I see the man of the future. We two are equals."

A friendship that did not use the word '*tu*', did not use Christian names, did not offer cigarettes—a friendship based on esteem, and which, in a moment or two, would be terribly exacting . . . Anxiety began to mingle with the splendid joy that filled Michel.

But those great silent hands had pressed down on the desk. As though made in one piece, the Director stood up. He walked over to the window and rested his head against the glass. Clearly he was trying to make out the building that housed *A*, and the enigmatic plutonium factory : the autumn light on the mountains—which had not been placed in his charge and merely served as a scenic background—was indifferent to him . . .

A minute passed, two minutes. Uranium 235 was still under-

going fission. A fiftieth of a milligram of plutonium must have freed itself in the darkness from the uranium rods and stuck to the magnesium cladding. A strange movement. Exactly like the motion of escape, or of the desire to approach the light.

"Good."

M. Launay was speaking to himself. He seemed completely absorbed. Then, with one more glance at the building that housed the pile and at the plutonium plant, he returned quickly to the small red chair with the blue arms, behind his desk. He began to speak :

"When I asked you to come and explain your difficulties, I intended to let you do nearly all the talking. But time has moved on, the situation has been modified, and now it is I who must do the talking. When I have finished you will decide whether I have left out anything important.

"Half an hour after our unexpected meeting this morning, I rang up your chief, Jean Aubier."

He paused and watched Michel, who looked him in the face and waited.

"I told Jean Aubier," the Director went on, "that you had confided to me an . . . uneasiness (the word is not a good one, I am sorry, but 'preoccupation' would, I think, not go far enough), and I asked for his opinion. I added that, in my view, the best thing would be for him to come down to Daneczan as soon as possible. Here is the answer I got from him : 'Renoir has all the competence required. There is no scientific reason for me to supervise him at this moment. He must continue to follow the pile until I have finished my work at Châtillon . . . '

"Same reaction from the Authority, which I then rang up. That Renoir is first-rate, etcetera. Besides . . ."

Launay's head moved forward.

". . . we have officially decided—so the person whom I had on the telephone told me—on the construction of three reactors . . ."

A silence. Was he going to reveal what Iturribe had not said? That, to take charge of the new reactors, Paris was thinking of Michel? No. He contented himself with a smile. He who has ears to hear . . . Privately he had no doubt as to the name of the man Paris had chosen, but since Paris, for reasons best known to itself,

had not thought fit to inform him of it, he felt he had no right to give an opinion.

If Launay enjoyed the strangeness of the scene, the tension which Michel might be experiencing formed no part of his pleasure: a chief does not play with his staff. He told himself simply that a man should be called upon as little as possible to think in terms of a relation between his personal value and the importance of his job, in order to avoid the danger of the latter coming to seem to him a deserved reward. A job is not a reward but a burden. He pulled out a drawer and took from it a model of *A*—a present from a group of designers who had made it with great care in their spare time. Transparent plastics had been used. The eye could see at a glance the regular terracing of the feverish uranium rods.

He placed the model on his desk, and held it between his hands like a statuette. Then he pushed it towards Michel with the south face towards him. The same face at which, that morning, Bousso and he had stared so hard . . .

Instinctively Michel bent forward. In his Paris office, in the Rue Raynouard (how long was it since he had worked there?), he possessed a duplicate of this model. He screwed up his eyes behind his glasses, to scrutinize the uranium rods. As though, by doing so, he would see the plutonium darting out from their small thicknesses, like an air bubble rising from the mud to the surface of a pool.

What seemed a new kind of silence had established itself. With the pile a third person had come into the room. Michel knew he was not trembling, but his breathing had become shorter. He contemplated that strange reduction—it was like the wax models used by sorcerers for their spells—and it seemed to him to radiate a stormy light. A solitary monument about to be struck by fire from heaven . . . He became conscious of a warning shock, a disagreeable one. He raised his head and suddenly realized that, deep down inside him, *someone* had engaged in begging all the forces of matter, the familiar ones as well as the mysterious ones, to respect the workings of the reactor. Never that! Science and truth before all that! If a man is wrong, whether because his calculations are erroneous or because they are not thorough, let him take the consequences.

He was about to speak, in order to get rid of his uneasiness. M. Launay got in first.

"We have here reactors *B* and *C* building, and hope to have two more—*D* and *E*. Elsewhere in France another three at the stage of preliminary study—let us call them *F*, *G* and *H*. We are sure we shall be able to manage nuclear energy : the real problem, from now on, is time. How many years shall we take to lower our prices and make them competitive? We have entered a race. The first and most important member of our team is at present pile *A*. On it, through all the links in the chain, everything depends. You can guess how strongly I react to your . . . observations. I am too acutely conscious of how gravely what might, in itself, be a perfectly normal failure of *A* would interfere with a vast programme."

Renoir bent his head, and M. Launay, filled with a surge of manly pride, smiled ironically. He was thinking that, at this turn in the conversation, in certain organizations with which he was acquainted, those taking part would have expended several minutes and much cerebral energy in exchanging politenesses : Renoir would have thanked him for the vigilant and flexible support given by his administration to the reactor men, and he would have congratulated Renoir on his professional conscientiousness as a scientist and as a technician at the Centre. Such pitiful tricks were unknown at Damezan ! Its researchers seemed to find anything like a compliment embarrassing.

M. Launay had no suspicion of why Michel had bent his head. Michel was thinking of his telephone conversation of two evenings ago. This evening he absolutely must get on to Labarsouques.

"Point number one," the Director resumed. "I have had notice of an A.F.P. despatch which will be in the papers tomorrow—and which they will embroider in their usual heavy fashion. The British atomic energy people have published a report on the grave accident at Windscale. You will see. I spoke to Aubier about that—it was a second reason for urging him to come, in case reporters descended, who could not be got rid of. But there again Aubier referred to you. He said that you know as well as he does the filters with which *A* is fitted, and that you will be quite capable of enlightening those tiresome people . . . It goes

without saying that an accident of the Windscale kind is unthinkable at Damezan—are we on the same wave-length?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Right.”

He had tapped with his ruler on the desk. An absent-minded movement, without meaning. He had not finished talking. He merely lowered his voice to indicate what in his mind was a parenthesis :

“One of the radiation detectors, which Cahuzac has dotted about over the countryside, has been stolen. At night, I suppose, since it was early this morning that the specialist who collects them noticed its absence. The apparatus is worth several million francs. It is of a current type, so there should be no question of scientific espionage. I would gladly accept the hypothesis that one of the peasants did it for fun or—if one must be sensational—that it was an act of vengeance on the part of one of the farmers who, by refusing again and again to lease us the land, forced us to expropriate it. But one detail worries me. The piece of apparatus in question occupied the most interesting place in our protective network. In relation to Damezan it was situated on the path of the mistral. That saboteur has a politician’s blood in his veins.”

Michel was getting ready to give an opinion, but already the Director had raised his hand and was continuing, more loudly :

“Enough of that. I have handed the affair over to Pennguern, who is working on it in co-operation with the local police and the *Sûreté*.

“Now for my second point, the essential one. Given the exceptional importance of the regular functioning of *A*, I am asking you and all the men on the reactor for exceptional vigilance. You, particularly. Your own scientific problem has in fact become that of the Centre, Martineau’s and mine. I cannot offer you technical guidance, but I want you to know that you are constantly in my thoughts.

“I said I was asking you for exceptional vigilance. I used an inexact word. I am not *asking*, I am *demanding*.

“I would add—and since we are equals I think I am not showing weakness in doing so—that it would embarrass me greatly if

I were obliged to give you detailed instructions. I am relying on you to take care of this. I recognize that the task is hard. In a human organization whose members are applying a complex of excellent current regulations, people cannot see that there can be any need for extraordinary measures. Exceptional vigilance—what does it mean?”

Michel closed his eyes. His temples were throbbing. He had lowered his hands to the sides of his chair, and his nails were taking a kind of evil pleasure in scratching its varnish.

A nasty moment to be got through. A long series of arrears of fatigue, caused chiefly by insomnia, had reminded him of its existence at the moment when Launay, with the noble brutality of his directorial friendship, had laid on him this harsh mission.

Two puffs at a cigarette, and his body would have regained its equilibrium. But Launay detested smoking during interviews and had let this be known.

Outside the fatigue, the strong clear voice rose again :

“And now, if you have any observations to make, I am ready to hear them.”

With an effort of will Michel sat upright and opened his eyes. Beyond the model of *A*, which stood half way between the two men like the object of a deal, he could see a long face contemplating him, the lips tightly closed, the eyes half closed, every muscle motionless. And he thought that there was no deceiving that man.

The spirit of Damezan, that high place of modern times, was blowing through the bare room. What need had its walls to be hung with pictures of Louis de Broglie, Becquerel or Jean Perrin? This was no travel agency for the distant foreign land of greatness. Here one lived already in the midst of greatness.

The scientist had stood up.

“I have no idea of the detailed measures I shall take,” he said with an impetuosity that already contradicted the ignorance of which he spoke. “In any case, have no fear : they will be taken and applied. I have no idea, either, of how I shall get closer to my problem; but I am equally certain that I shall do so. Along with the Centre’s whole cycle of operations, I consider my honour is at stake. Even if it kills me.”

"You are not being asked to let it do that. Sit down a moment," said M. Launay prosaically.

With his unfortunate access of enthusiasm cut short, Michel had obeyed. He waited. The sound of his vigorous breathing embarrassed him.

"One might think you were a romantic schoolboy," said the head of Damezan slowly.

And *he* smiled. But Michel had not the strength to do the same. Annoyed at having gone too far, he listened gloomily.

"You do not ordinarily use big words. Am I to understand that you are tired?"

Michel's only reply was a vague gesture. Launay observed him for a while. And it was he who, suddenly, stood up and expansively held out his right hand across the desk.

Across the model.

With a clear-cut lever-like movement which in him must have meant an outburst of emotion he shook Michel's hand again and again.

Michel, without knowing why, was sure that M. Launay had some other difficult thing to say to him and that he would say it.

"Always remember . . ."

A sixth sense warned Michel that the paternal tone was the prelude to an attack.

" . . . the cleverest and most devoted technicians, in making their plan of work, sometimes forget to include in it duties which, they think, belong to another field than science. But the life of a man of science is not divided into watertight compartments."

He was seeing him out. He opened the door without another word. Michel, still dazed by the director's last phrases, which he had not had time to understand, bowed and went. A man at once got up from a chair in the hall and approached. It was Cahuzac. The head of Security was crumpling a handkerchief in his right hand. He gave Michel a vague smile, then entered M. Launay's office.

AGGRESSIVE, IT SEEMED, THE AZURE. AND FUNEREAL THE meticulous light which brought out the bone-structure of things, from the nearby holly branch to the scaffolding of *B* and *C*.

The car had still not moved: the man was listening to the mistral. On principle his courage ignored the weather, but today he could not prevent the feeling of the wind from outside penetrating into his veins and inviting the best blood in him to idleness.

It was years since he had experienced a hesitation like this! He thought that, whatever choice he made, he would miss the essential. He was ashamed of this uncertainty, yet at the same time tolerant of it. The absurd, miserable idea came into his head of going back to the Director's office like a child that has been scolded and cannot bear it. Had not Launay's last sentences had an insulting meaning? A Launay arrogating to himself the right to dig about in people's private lives made a paradoxical effect, and yet no other explanation seemed satisfying.

He pressed the self-starter, but had not come to any decision. He let in the clutch. The car wanted to be on the move—better let it have its way. A minute later he stopped.

He got out. Over several yards of its façade the building that housed the pile—a creature of such density and so self-contained—gave the false impression of being a glass-house. The irony of it! All that the expanse of glass allowed to be seen was the guard, a short dark man with a crew-cut, who sat there as the regulations required, behind his table, with his revolver holster stuck in his belt.

The metallic whistling of the fan sawed away at space.

Michel went in and approached the guard. Since his face was a familiar one, he felt an impulse to smile at him, but restrained himself. He presented his identity card and was given the film, which he put in his pocket. Slowly he went up the stairs.

Although he opened the door of the control room without a sound, Guillot, who was relieving Labarsouques, had turned. He still needed to learn calm. Michel made a sign that no one was to move. He read the findings of several dials and then, since all seemed normal, withdrew.

The sensation of repose he had just experienced seemed to him too simple. The professional seriousness to which everything in the place bore witness—the vigilant attitudes of the technicians, as well as the order and abundance of the synoptic charts, recording instruments and knobs—was conducive to too great a confidence in human power.

He could not refrain from glancing at the pile itself.

The impenetrable nuclear reactor, stuck to and dug into the ground by all the force of its concrete, received the glance with the silence of some petrified prehistoric monster just laid bare, a giant cuttlefish with thousands of opaque eyes and a distended belly, in the depths of some subterranean gallery. If that mass, like its sister at Windscale in England two months before, was evolving a scheme for revolt, would it ever say so? Michel folded his arms and gazed at it. To slip into the interior of that forcing-house of matter, in order to spy out the sonnambulistic comings and goings of the fission products and the arrival of the plutonium on the periphery of the rods, seemed even more surely impossible—his mind could find no better expression—than to go down into the crater of a volcano in eruption in order to study its alchemy.

The engineer turned away and frowned. He was struggling against a strange train of thought which was trying gradually to entrap him.

In the gallery, not far from Boussot's office, he met the Security chief. Cahuzac was gliding along with his usual rapid stride and with his white jacket flowing out behind him. How was he going to replace the stolen detector? What orders had he just received? They would know tomorrow. The two men brushed past each other without stopping, exchanging even vaguer smiles than they had in the directorial anteroom.

Michel had entered Boussot's office and had at once begun an account of his visit to the Director. He would have liked to leave out the decision taken in high quarters to begin the preliminary

study for three new reactors : for nothing in the world would he have wished to give the impression that he knew he was destined to direct this programme, and he was afraid the inflexions of his voice would betray him . . . Well, if they did . . . Launay had not asked him to keep the matter secret from his immediate colleagues; and, like him, Michel needed this detail in order to stress the necessity for an avowedly 'exceptional' vigilance.

When he had finished speaking, Boussot, who had not once interrupted him, shook his head and muttered, with a smile : "We'll do all we can."

Michel had already stood up.

"I think . . ." he began, then bit his lip. No, he would say no more. The Labarsouques incident concerned him only. With his head sunk between his shoulders he made for the door.

He was back in his office. Hanging from its peg, the greyish-yellowish plastic helmet—the only thing that decorated the walls—emanated, like some proud spaniel, inviting scents of the countryside, but the man was not listening to such language. Before seeing Martineau he must ring up Aubier and, before ringing up Aubier, must set his thoughts in order. With a cigarette between his lips and his hands in his pockets, he paced for some time up and down the room.

Come clean, he said to himself; admit you want an accident . . . I'm not saying you're a saboteur. I'm saying that for you *A* is a guinea-pig, and that you'd rub your hands if it copped a real breakdown from which you could at once pick up fresh data. That would enable you to put the problem more plainly, if not to solve it. Your reactors of the future would never break down; they would never know a misadventure like Windscale or Chalk River.

As if you didn't know that one can't afford accidents in a pile like this—it isn't a thing science can mark out with buoys. Before one can learn from it, a breakdown means chaos, you poor head-in-air scientist! If *A*'s tall chimney spreads radioactive dust over the countryside when the mistral is blowing, let me catch you saying that you'd be able to limit the catastrophe . . .

You're lying, he retorted to himself immediately. Being frank doesn't mean making oneself odious or ridiculous on principle.

I've never wanted a misfortune. I'm doing everything I can and perhaps more to avoid one.

All I'm claiming is that, if an accident does happen, I've the right, indeed the duty, to make use of it. Catch me being silly enough to deprive French know-how of such a lesson! People have considered me worthy of being told the extent of French effort in the field of nuclear energy. I have the right, then, to my say.

No, you're setting up as a superman. Who has given you the right or the duty to play about with other people's money, and perhaps their agony? The coolness with which you accept the idea of a catastrophe is monstrous. It might lay you open to the accusation of being its ally.

A scientist must consider everything. Why be frightened of what I hold impossible? Besides, my calmness is only on the surface. I've a job, and I do what it involves. I should be betraying my trust if ever I abandoned myself to the spirit of routine and of fear . . .

Simply for peace and quiet he opened the door to his secretary's room. He needed to look at a human face. To see himself again in the eyes of one of those human beings whom he reproached himself for forgetting.

Mme Vauvert stopped typing. She had blushed : her chief had caught her smoking.

"Excuse me, sir," she put down her cigarette.

As Michel did not reply, she thought he was annoyed.

"Please don't be angry with me : I'm rather on edge this afternoon."

And what about me? he thought bitterly.

A little woman with a quarrelsome husband or a sick child—that was all he could find in the place of refuge. Of course. And now he would be obliged to say something nice.

"Get me Monsieur Aubier, please."

"At once, sir."

Mme Vauvert gave him an appealing look.

"Sir, just now . . ." She could not go on.

"Do you want me to bring you some smelling salts?" he said brutally.

She blushed again. She had just, she said, been to the canteen

for a hot whisky. M. Bertorelle had turned on the wireless, and all of a sudden it had begun talking of a disaster in a British atomic centre.

Michel had tactlessly burst out laughing. Windscale, eh? An old, old story. A fortunate accident, a fortunate one . . .

"If there is anything serious about it," he said with emphasis, "I assure you it's the credulity of the public."

She stared at him, and, since he kept his eyes fixed on her, it seemed as though she grew calmer.

"I wasn't afraid for my own sake," she explained, "it was for my little boy. If I had known . . . I should have sent him back to Paris."

"If you'd known what?"

"I don't know how to say it . . ."

"Then find out how. It's an order."

He hurled the words straight at her in a voice trembling with anger.

"I said to myself," she whispered, bending her head, "if anything happened at Damezan? Since . . ."

She stopped.

For a second time he had met her fears with a contemptuous laugh. And he was still laughing. He had folded his arms. He had decided that he must do the job both of a psychologist and of a judge.

"To think that you're my secretary!" he let fall, with a disillusioned expression.

There was a silence. Mme Vauvert did not raise her eyes. A secretary, thought Michel. A technician's secretary. In the know of so many splendid realities. How could such a woman not rise above the petty views of her sisters? Really it made him feel like treating Juliette more indulgently.

He pushed these thoughts aside. He must settle the Vauvert case quickly.

"You ought to be ashamed," he boomed, "you, an intelligent woman. There's nothing—either this Windscale squib or anything else—that could give you ground for thinking that what was true when you took up your job has become untrue. We're starting a dangerous industry and working with materials whose properties are not very well known, but dammit! we're not either

thugs or mugs and we surround ourselves with all the safeguards necessary. Understand? *Capito?*”

“Yes, yes, sir,” she stammered. But he would have liked more conviction. He burst out again.

“Do you think a man like Monsieur Launay, with his sense of duty that shades off into infinity, wouldn’t resign if he thought our precautions weren’t up to scratch?”

That argument had told. Mme Vauvert’s eyes became visible and she smiled charmingly.

“I assure you,” she said, “that your example is enough for me.”

The complimentary turn of phrase got on Michel’s nerves. He turned on his heel and strode towards his office.

“Good,” he said, cutting her short. “And now get me Monsieur Aubier.”

Martineau was only waiting for Michel. As soon as he saw him come in, he signalled to begin.

It was another rehearsal. One more. And to be followed by many others. Odd bits of hardware, pots of red lead, coils of wire, lay about the gallery, and the faces of those present, in spite of their tenseness, had not lost their calm.

Only, everyone here knew that, ineluctably, an hour would come when the last traces of preparatory activity would be removed and the unfolding of the real drama would begin. In four months’ time, said the official reports, the factory for the separation of plutonium would begin to function. In seven months’ time, thought Launay. Six, Martineau insisted. These differences of date were not negligible, but when one thought of the significance of the event that would be set going, one would gladly have swept them aside. At that irrevocable hour, should not Man be able to rest from a long series of tasks, which presented alarming dangers, by passing them over to machines? Whereas these machines, still subject to his control but given over to their own powers, would be as definitely out of reach of any human means of correction as a loose propeller blade is to an airman in flight. Or as his remote, yet so close, heartbeats are to a musician face to face with the public.

A real disaster, with bloodshed, ruins and panic, could naturally be excluded. If, by ill luck, some part of the mechanism

should seize up, in a part of the factory closed by its radio-activity henceforward to all human access, the technicians following the operation in front of their television cameras would have no wide choice of reactions—they would have one only: in a few seconds to cut off the electric current, before unpredictable storms could break. But that apparently commonplace and quite temporary renunciation of a process of chemical phenomena would mean, for half the works (two distinct chains had wisely been provided), an act of deicide. An erroneous calculation? A detail forgotten? . . . A material failure? Immediately, in inescapable connection with the breakdown, several thousand millions of francs and ten years of research and hard work would go up in smoke. For decades the whole demonic palace of the 'hot sun' would remain closed, for all practical purposes dead, stuck in the midst of the invisible and useless unwinding of its cruel radiations.

Michel kept his eyes fixed on the thin, angular, pale face of that man, so sure of himself and of the possibilities of science, who directly, at the top of the pyramid, bore this enormous load of care. He had emerged somewhat disappointed from his telephone conversation with Jean Aubier. Once more—still—that excess of confidence, on the part of others, in Michel Renoir's capabilities! At the end of a minute he had been unable to help recognizing the music without retaining the words—those swift yet considered words falling from the 'exalted spheres' of Paris and saying, over and over, that Michel was being given a blank cheque. And he thought he saw that this intellectual euphoria was evidence not merely of the man's technical confidence, nor of friendship: Jean Aubier the happy father and happy husband made possible the expansion of Jean Aubier the nuclear energy man. As that damned Launay had said, life was not divided into watertight compartments.

Come, come! These inductive reasonings, based on details that one happened to see, were mere folly. Martineau, a confirmed celibate, was the very image of the completely integrated man of science.

A telephone bell rang.

"They're ready, down there," said the fellow who had taken the call.

The plutonium chief nodded and began to press various blue

and red buttons. On the charts, lights came on. Behind the thick glass window which gave a view of the cage where the rods would be received—it was in the 'semi-hot' sector—the heavy steel chain descended silently and slowly on its way to meet the materials which had, in theory, arrived from the decanning section.

It stopped. A few seconds went by, and then forms began to glow on the television screens. A white star, which seemed always trying in vain to break away from certain gritty clouds, indicated the far end of the protective cage, as perceived and transmitted by the electronic eye. Michel shivered. He had never been able to follow this performance without uneasiness.

The chain had begun to rise again. A hook appeared, supporting a ring, and then a heavy steel cylinder ending in a point at the bottom—the closed and movable cradle imprisoning the uranium rod. Michel's eyes glowed with recognition. His emotion increased still further. Beads of sweat came out on his forehead and at the roots of his hair. Behind the glass the chain and the mass it carried had begun to sway: it was just like the movement of a dancer who tests his muscles before a lift.

Was there not some deception? he asked himself with a troubled exaltation. Everything in this place suggested that it was not humanity but matter, the marvellous unknown, whose advance science was striving to assure.

No more time for thinking now: an invisible train had just gone into action, solemnly pushing chain and cylinder sideways, while down there, about ten yards away, the wonderfully synchronized doors to the hot sector, towards which the whole of that group of metal was moving, were opening in slow motion.

For a fraction of a second Michel looked at Martineau. With his chin thrown back and his mouth half open, the plutonium chief was watching, with the fierce eyes of a theatrical director, the characters he had let loose.

The people who had thought they were innovating when they made animals play in a film were now behind the times! Steel, copper, uranium and plutonium had the art of introducing into their play, at the first go, the grand sobriety of the old mimes. It was the archetypal drama of sacrifice that they were enacting at that moment. Had any lamas in the silence of Tibetan monasteries ever glided down the corridors with a more impressive

religious deliberation? Matter was moving forward, asking to be allowed to suffer, for the sake of initiation. And no human thought would ever divine the august caprices in which terrible, unnamed forces might indulge, for the sole benefit of certain invisible and Protean chemical products, within those inhuman halls where the purification would take place, isolating and condensing the plutonium till it formed those sacred ingots, as precious as the heaviest diamonds, whose potential energy would equal two million times that of coal.

The doors were now fully open. They ceased to move. Through the glass, and at such a distance, the Satanic vestibule to the metamorphoses, to which the doors had given access, could not be made out clearly. As thick as castle walls, they symbolized the strange, mysterious lock joining and separating death and resurrection. The cylinder went into the maw. There did not seem to be any welcome for the neophyte. But already things had reached the point at which they evaded the glance of the curious : the doors had begun to close.

The two men were alone together. Martineau was talking. As he listened to his friend discoursing enthusiastically on the complete cycle of operations which he would direct when the time came, Michel regained his faith. It was like that of a Levite, fervent in proportion to the doubts he had just felt about the resources with which imagination could enable one to move through the windings of the apparatus sheltered within the active section of the plutonium factory, without missing anything of the play of matter, or of its work. Martineau was right! Scientists would impose their orders.

"Listen," Martineau was saying. "I am plutonium. I am poisonous, explosive, etcetera, but if I'm treated with sufficient respect I consent to let myself be purified. When I go in through the secret door of your factory, I'm still stuck to the uranium which has exuded me and to certain fine magnesium impurities of which you have failed to cleanse me at the de-canning. Good. Well, then, this is what I, plutonium, think and am prepared to do. Note this carefully, please . . ."

An extraordinary gaiety flashed in the eyes of the chief of the mysterious factory. If matter can mime to perfection the most

exalted human rites, he, the technician of matter, is no less capable of identifying himself with it and retracing all its intentions. It seems enough just to listen to him . . .

I too shall reach this stage, Michel repeated to himself. I must. I absolutely must. Launay, Aubier and Martineau expect it. So does Damezan. So does that site which already exists though it has not been chosen, where the formidable foundations of my nuclear reactors are to be implanted.

6

"GET ME, PLEASE, AUTEUIL . . . 02 . . . 33 . . . YES, DOUBLE three."

The telephone girl had accepted the number without any allusion to lines being down. And yet, outside, what a mistral! It was galloping like a young bull, in furious rushes, all along the Rhône valley, through the vast dry darkness pierced by the luminous forests of the towns. A cold draught, smelling of grass and stone, invaded the telephone booth. The morning's pleasant breeze had become a storm: each of its gusts wildly shook millions of vine stocks and branches, electric cables and Roman tiles, factories and farmsteads.

Ceaselessly, on the plateau of Damezan, A's tall chimney must be expectorating, in silence, floods of used air. Around it, as though about the head of some pious statue, the three lines of coloured lights had come on, to warn aircraft against the obstacle. All the little jewels were now shining, gentle and definite, beneath the fixed snowflakes of the stars, but they in no way illuminated the night-coloured torrent escaping above them, on which the mistral seized, as on its own property, to carry it off in its vast stream.

The fine deflector was perfectly visible, but how could one tell what breaths of impurity were falling on it and, instead of bouncing back, gliding to the ground?

"You're through, caller!"

Michel was caught speechless. The telephone girl had to speak to him sharply several times before he could be brought to recog-

nize that he was not really looking at the pile's chimney; and he heard Juliette beginning to talk.

"Tell me . . ."

And already a spate of words was pouring into his ear from Paris. It was the fault of his absurd wool gathering.

They were words—the last straw, this—that brought him back to the pile.

That pretty flat, close to the Seine, was also in the know. With assurance it described the Windscale accident as 'frightful'. A wonderful thing, the feminine command of language.

"What's all this? A lesson in ancient history. And for a thing of less than no importance. A technical mishap, and not a single death."

"A woman who's studied medicine and only broke off in her last year to please her fiancé, isn't an ignoramus. I can perfectly well imagine what the spread of radioactive dust means."

"Did you get this Tommy rot from the wireless?"

"The information came from Papa. The communiqué was published in one of the evening papers. He rang me up specially from the *Chambre*. Several of his colleagues are disturbed. They'd like to see you."

"To hell with them! Sorry, but really Members of Parliament ought to have other worries."

A silence. She waited for him to have the courtesy to dissociate his father-in-law from this unmannerly reproach . . . All right, Papa Laffon was a decent fellow. He should pay, all the same, for his daughter's frivolity. All these outsiders meddling, grotesquely, in a difficult problem!

But Juliette was returning to the charge:

"In the circumstances, aren't you going to stop your experiments?"

He nearly burst out swearing. The term 'experiment' hurt him like an insult. Nuclear science in France had long passed that stage. A grown-up industry was functioning at Damezan.

"Weigh your words, please," he muttered, wearily. But the reply he received was that he had better weigh his own.

Should he put down the receiver? Without having talked about Michel?

"I should like to know," he began afresh, "whose lesson you

are repeating when you ask such a question. It can't be your father's. He has too much sense."

"You're right, it's not father's, not directly. I could have kept that to myself, but I prefer to be frank, as you know. Don't go looking for things that aren't there. People have their loyalties. You may be surprised, you may think coincidence has a long arm, but I assure you . . ."

What a flood of words! He decided to suspend his attention till she finished. He thought of the pile's chimney standing up, all-powerful, to the violence of the mistral, of the graphite boomerang bouncing the neutrons back, of the plutonium rusting the rods with its lichen, of the feed-back circuits letting a message pass . . .

But when the name came out, he heard it at once. André Thomas-Laborde. He had all too many reasons for not failing to recognize it.

"That wet again!" he growled. "I ought to have guessed. His lot proliferate on the problems of genuine scientists like maggots on dead bodies. You can tell him so from me."

"Don't fly off the handle, Michel. André didn't ring me up, he went to see father at the *Chambre*. I don't think you can find anything to say against a man who's conscious of his professional duties—you to whom your own are so dear. Besides, you approved the choice of André as godfather to Pierrette. He's an old and very good friend."

"Frog-peepers haven't ever been my friends, and they never will be."

"My poor Michel, you get more difficult to live with every day!"

And you, he thought, get more and more second-rate, it seems to me. But he had the strength not to say it.

"Have you finished, Paris?" asked the telephone girl in the silence.

"No, no, not yet." It was he who had said this, so anxiously. It was he who had not wished to break off contact. No, he had said, not yet . . . How long would his patience last?

"Listen to me, Juliette, you're making a great mistake, for your sake as well as mine, in rushing into a field that isn't yours. Let's drop it, or we'll quarrel. We must settle Michel's future: that's what is important. I have definite views, which I will

explain to you one of these days, when I have the chance to come up to Paris. But here and now . . .”

The engineer switched on the three lights, glanced round the room, then took off his shoes and tie and threw himself on the bed. Sleep? No question of that this evening.

Up through the floor there still rose the muffled chatter of the sound-track of the television show, which about ten of the people from Damezan were watching in the hall. It was a documentary on locomotives. That the magnificent photographs did not dissolve in the whistling darkness beyond the walls had seemed an achievement. But how could one loll in an easy chair with one's legs stretched out, killing time with a film, when one thought of one's new responsibilities and their utter dependence on the regular working of the pile? There flashed into his memory a phrase of Valéry's, addressed to civilizations: 'I know now that you are mortal.' Michel applied it to the machine-monuments created by the hands and thought of man. To everything that stood out there on the Damezan plateau.

"Keep a cool head and stop when you reach the limit," M. Launay had said one day—that chief who was incapable of uttering a hollow phrase. And yet, had the life of a single man ever ended without his discovering his exact capacity of resistance? He must grope on, day after day, at his research.

'Stop at the limit.' Certainly. And then—in the restaurant just now—there was Martineau interrupting a conversation to come over and say: "I'm taking the night train. Sorry to miss the Director's planning meeting tomorrow." Then a wink and a smile. "I trust your reactor will do good work in my absence. The lovely factory I showed you is greedy. It guzzles all our plutonium *ex officio*." A fresh smile . . . Dear Martineau—his courtesy was unfailing, but he knew how to keep on people's heels.

How could one sleep when, at the next meeting, Martineau would again ask you to nourish his factory? That damned plutonium, on which everything depended . . . It was becoming impossible to take the two tablets of aspirin which would have plunged him into repose without fail. He must think about the Problem.

But first of all settle the Labarsouques incident.

"Get me . . ."

No, it wasn't a weakness. A watchful chief must communicate with his men. He is the one who best appreciates the reality of the dangers that prowl about, and the full seriousness of any failure.

"Labarsouques? Renoir. How goes it?"

Which meant, not 'How are you?' but 'How is the pile?'.

"One of the rods went up, but there was still a margin."

Excellent technician! He had understood at once the kind of answer expected of him. And he was providing his questioner with the best possible transition.

"The same as the day before yesterday?"

"No, another."

"Ah! Very good."

Now was the moment to place a sentence . . . Michel hesitated between several openings . . . But already, as though his hand were taking the decision in his stead, he had put down the receiver.

A great gust of mistral flogged the garden.

The heating of a rod was a routine thing. It was not an accident. Not even a hitch. Like a sleeping tiger that stretches out a paw and draws it in again, the pile was feeling an obscure need to recall the fact of its existence.

Michel looked at his alarm-clock. Ten minutes to eleven. Only!

He wondered if Martineau, who had only just had time to catch his train, would consent to sleep: 'I've done my day's work, there are worries waiting for me tomorrow, I shall lie down in my sleeper and summon sleep . . .' No, Martineau. I know you rely on Aubier, on Launay, on Boussot and on me, but still you can't bring yourself to go to sleep, when every revolution of the wheels takes you farther from your treasure, from the powdering of the rods in the inviolable entrails of the pile. There's enough for several kilos now. When will you be able to collect it into a block? On November 20th, 1949, when the first milligramme of French plutonium was isolated at Châtillon, you were wild with joy. No, Martineau, I'm sure you don't really sleep. You've merely closed your eyes and slipped away from the scene that imprisons you.

The spirit of Martineau has returned to Damezan. It's wan-

dering about the scaffoldings of *B* and *C*. It's looking for the formula that will enable plutonium to excite with its marvellous energy the uranium rods of the two piles to be. There'll have to be an alloy metal, but which one? And in what proportions?

I'm sure Juliette was the mistress of that man Thomas-Laborde, before we were engaged. Out of love, or out of pity? Probably I shall never know, and the problem's hardly important . . . *He* must be asleep now—wretched geneticist—radiantly happy because the Windscale accident has given him a chance of a remarkable victory. The atomists have taken such a beating that the wife of one of them has had to ask him over the telephone for a scientific consultation . . . The idea of it! Informing Juliette of the dangers of nuclear reaction! He must have enjoyed himself as he whispered his pontifical phrases.

A telephone rang. Here in the room. Michel raised himself on his elbow and picked up the receiver. It was the distant voice of Labarsouques.

"What is it?" he said sharply. And was irritated to find that he was anxious.

"Monsieur Launay has just been round, with Monsieur Cahuzac. We thought we'd better warn you, and Monsieur Boussot."

"Did it go off all right?"

"Quite all right. They didn't stay long."

"Did you tell Monsieur Launay about your rod?"

"No. Anyhow its temperature isn't budging. It had gone up just after you rang. But hardly at all."

"I rely on you."

"Right, Monsieur Renoir. Leave it to us."

Michel felt a slight disagreeable shock at the click of the receiver as he put it back on its rest. It was as if he had broken off the contact between him and the men at the pile roughly. Mysterious things were going to happen out there.

Childish!

Was the rod, too, childish? Certainly. Labarsouques, who was a technician with plenty of sense, had not even thought it worth mentioning to the Director.

Don't rejoice too soon, André Thomas-Laborde, you poor

thing! the atomists aren't panicky people. Do you give way to despair when your white mice have colic? . . .

11.20 p.m. The muted clamour of the television no longer infiltrated into the room. Now there were only the cat calls and whistlings of the mistral and the rattling of silky chains made by the millions of leaves in the garden. The storm's fan!

The light flickered as a terrible squall, with a howl almost too shrill for hearing, pushed like a buttress against the building. The electric light bulbs grew more intense, then suddenly went out. An immediate sound of voices showed that Michel was not the only human being inhabiting the great windy house, but by the time he had found a match and struck it the breakdown was already over. The three bulbs came on again . . . He sat up and considered his small table-lamp, whose light was beating rapidly, like a heart exposed. There was a tinkle of breaking glass, and the bulb was dead. He jumped off his bed.

The car drew up close against the barrier, which trembled in the light of the headlamps. The icy tumult of the mistral was lashing against vague masses to right and left.

Over there, loyal and reliable, the pile's tall chimney rose between its softly glowing nightlights. Confusedly, between the gusts, the ear could make out the sound of the fan. The plutonium honey was still being gathered in.

Good. He had been wrong to worry. But the failure of the bulb had reminded him too intensely, like some sluice opening up in the memory, of the oxblood-red end-caps of the elements.

Good. He would ask Boussot to have them painted.

The guard had put his head into the car. He flashed his bull's-eye into Michel's face.

"Renoir," muttered the engineer. Certain of being recognized he showed his identity card for form's sake.

Without a word the policeman took it between the thumb and forefinger and held it to his lamp. Then he examined the face again.

"Yes . . ." he whispered with, it seemed, a shade of regret.

This was not the first time that the great reactor specialist had been stopped at the gates of Damezan like a mere outsider, and

he had always preferred to laugh it off; but tonight it made him melancholy.

The barrier was raised, and the car moved forward.

Inside, in the windless gallery where all the electric globes shone continually, one knew it was night by the altered sound of footsteps. And one knew it, in the control room, by the fatigue on the human faces, covered with stubble and pale or yellow with sleeplessness. No one spoke. Isolated, the white-jacketed technicians studied, on their instruments, the great silent signals which they extracted from the pile. The reactor could not be seen, but it could be felt quite close, like the vast ocean at night from a bridge . . . And indeed these people were the watch.

Michel took up a position behind Labarsouques, who was sitting with a chronometer under his eyes, and, in front of him, a chart reproducing the pile's cooling system. The man started and, before turning, placed his right hand on a telephone receiver in a recess an inch or two from his elbow. It was as if he was laying hold of a weapon.

"Well? Still all right?"

Labarsouques shut his eyes for an instant.

"All right."

His worn face crinkled into a smile and, with a kind of disillusioned banter, he added :

"We've had some visits this evening !"

"They're afraid of the mistral ferreting about in the pile, I suppose? Joking apart, what about that rod?"

Labarsouques stood up. They went together into a corner of the room to look at a miniature cross section of the reactor.

"It was that one."

He pointed at a number—723—with the certainty of a prison governor indicating a trouble-maker. Michel bent down closer. As long as one had not determined the nature of the threat, localizing it was not much of an advantage. There was nothing as yet to tell what had happened—what was still happening—in the knob of matter down in the darkness of 723.

"Little swine," he growled, without conviction : it was the job of matter to lead scientists a dance.

The revolt must have re-absorbed itself. Like a wavelet of

spume, out in the open, which separates itself from a wave and then falls back, fragile, and vanishes into the mass. If Martineau, in the steamy darkness of his carriage, desired to find sleep, let him feel no scruple! Docile and regular as a Savings Bank book, *A* was setting aside for him his dear plutonium, milligramme by milligramme.

Michel glanced round the fine, bright, warm room in which the ten studious and tenacious men kept watch. He allowed himself a feeling of relief.

When he was back under the globes of the deserted gallery, he made, none the less, for the nave.

Was he not yielding to superstitious fear? Like the guard just now?

Observation revealed nothing special about the end-cap of element number 723.

But at the bottom of the octagon—was this illusion?—the caps seemed even redder . . .

A stupid detail. First thing tomorrow he must certainly have them painted.

7

AS HE PARKED HIS CAR MICHEL, WORN OUT BY THE DIN OF the mistral, forgot what he was doing: he switched off the lights and the Vedette grazed a plane-tree.

I'm not getting enough sleep, he thought, as he opened the door. Without bothering to see what damage was done, he ran towards the large house, now in darkness.

He switched on the light in the hall. On the table set aside for letters a slip of paper with his name on it met his eyes: 'Telephone message from the Centre. M. Renoir is wanted at Damezan. Urgently.'

He looked at his watch: he had left Damezan only thirty minutes before. The ink of the message was still hardly dry. If he had not had the absurd idea of going into a café for a glass of beer, they might have got through to him in person.

To hell with thoughts of secondary things! Forgetting to turn out the light, he ran back to the garden.

A level crossing. He must wait while a goods train went by : forty-six trucks.

Windscale?

Certainly not. *They* would have roused everybody, surely.

Panic not allowed. The peculiar importance of Damezan is too great for that.

When I get to the top of the hill, I need only look to the south. Isn't some monstrous spectacle waiting for me? A field of ruins lit by flames? . . . I'm seeing the classic vision of my nightmares. No, that silhouette with a line as pure as a Tahitian girl's neck is *A's* chimney, bathed in the faint, rose-coloured light from its warning lamps. Damezan, being an excellent worker, is hard at work. The reserve of plutonium in the reactor has increased by some two grammes since my lightning visit . . .

Absurd optimism! I can't have been summoned without some grave reason. What decides my joy and my setbacks dwells in the invisible.

The red barrier trembled, just as it had not long ago, and the mistral lashed the open spaces, while the tall chimney, that symbol of strength and wisdom, still rose within its own field of light, but the distant noise of the fan had fallen silent. Shadows were coming and going to right and left. A loud voice announced "Monsieur Renoir!" and the barrier rose.

Without hesitating the car made for the reactor building. There was no message waiting for Michel at the entrance to the Centre—they had trusted to his instinct.

Two cars were drawn up before the great glass door : those of Boussot and Launay.

He went into the hall. Without a word he handed his identity card to the guard, who was sitting as usual behind a table. The man put the paper in its place and gave him a film. His expression was deceptively indifferent. He *knew*; but even his physiology obeyed orders, and he abstained from any sign of curiosity or uneasiness. Michel liked this priestly discretion. He stiffened,

slipped the film into his pocket and walked rapidly up the stairs, one at a time.

Not a soul in the silent gallery, which the pile's lethargy made melancholy. No mutter of voices from behind Bousso's door. Clearly everyone was in the control room.

The night shift. But Michel hardly glanced at them. He caught sight of Launay, Bousso and Cahuzac, who had turned at his approach. Their faces gave no sign of consternation. A new hardness, explained only to a small extent by lack of sleep, had risen from deep within them: instinctively courage was calling to its aid all the resources of the body.

Michel, on edge with shame at being the last to arrive, had already felt that one must strike the right note. Straight to the point. No polite excuses.

Silently, with a gesture, M. Launay had drawn his men to one side.

"Well?" said Michel. "Is it a big ball-up?"

On purpose, against his usual inclination, he used a vulgar phrase. One should treat fate roughly—make quite clear to it that technicians did not feel bound to respect its decisions.

M. Launay raised his right hand in a gesture that might mean a greeting or an oath.

"It's something very like that," he said in a toneless voice. "We shall soon know more. I must leave you, but Bousso will inform you of the data we have so far . . . We must expect to find a major slug-burst."

The phrase hit Michel like a blow. Once again dominating personal pride, he examined his companions. None of them glanced at him. The team considered itself collectively responsible. Without wasting a second in suspicions of one or other of its members, it was stiffly facing the situation.

The Director continued: he would go to his office and get in touch with Paris; he would personally announce the thing to Aubier (Renoir would give the details later). In half an hour, say at seven minutes past one, another meeting, here on the spot, to get things clear. If any points of interest emerged before then, he could be reached on absolute priority.

"Au revoir, messieurs."

He went out, leaving the door open. A few seconds later Cahuzac in his turn went out.

With cold rage, like a man testing the dressing of his wound, Michel muttered, without raising his head :

"723 caught fire."

"Yes," Jacques confirmed. "The pile stopped itself."

"Between ourselves, how was Labarsouques?"

"Very calm."

"I'm not surprised. He'll make an excellent engineer and—later . . ."

He pulled up short. Here he was, amid the obscurities of the present event, still allowing himself to live in the future. Calmly to entrust to a man the working of reactors that did not exist. That doubtless would never exist . . . After a serious accident which would call for so much discussion, could there be any future at all for him in atomic work?

"No escape of radioactive dust?" he resumed sharply.

"We think not. Cahuzac and his team are checking up. Let's say, if you like, negligible quantities."

Michel gave a quick nod of approval. It was the answer he was hoping for, but in this field absolutely nothing must be taken on trust. He drew Bousset into a corner and indicated by a wink that he was going to put an awkward question. He paused to draw breath. He wanted to be sure of the tone of his voice. Not to show his humiliation.

Too late. Behind his friend's shoulder he saw the face of Labarsouques. The event, concentrate on the event.

"Well, Labarsouques?"

A light never seen before shone in the eyes of the young engineer, giving his features a disquieting malignity. He suggested a fox that has just played a trick. For the first time for several hours he had torn himself away from his instruments, and suddenly, involuntarily, his memory was filled with lurid images. He was discovering that he had occupied an historic position. For the rest of his life he would be the man who had had the revelation of the calamity, had given the alarm and taken the first emergency measures. A sinister privilege and, still more, a delicious burden, a strange reason for pride over which the

most intelligent and highly esteemed heads would never be able to prevail.

"A major slug-burst, and perhaps two or three small ones," he declared in a voice that quivered with secret contentment. "We shall have to change four of the fuel elements."

"That remains to be seen," said Michel, sharply, cutting him short. "We want from you simply the facts."

Labarsouques blinked, by no means put out by being brought back to the point. Slowly he told his story.

It was five minutes after M. Renoir's unexpected visit of inspection. The automatic radioactivity counter was just reaching slugs 1315 and 1316. Everything seemed normal, but the heat registered in 723 was worrying the engineer. He wondered if he should not stop the mechanism and restart the testing at 700s. There was no change of temperature, but he reflected that the counter summed up the temperature for the whole of the pile and that, given the large number of rods there were, deplorable variations might occur in individual slugs without being discovered by this method : the channels would need to be scanned individually.

Had Labarsouques the right to ask for such a measure? If he revealed the matter to Boussot, he would be alarming everyone, almost certainly without reason

He was not given the time to pursue his train of thought. The accident was destined to arise, or at any rate reveal itself, suddenly. A most disagreeable sensation of all hell breaking loose. The walls gave no tremor, but it was as though the air one breathed had been struck by a torpedo; indicators dancing, sirens going off and power falling straight to zero. Should he stop the pile? It had carried out the operation on its own. In the profound darkness of its block, cadmium scram rods had moved in, stopping the flux of neutrons.

While his assistants stopped the blower, rang up Security, rang up Renoir, rang up Launay, etcetera, Labarsouques hastily checked up the controls, and, finding that they seemed intact, set to work the withdrawal mechanism of element 723 and its neighbours. This instinct was the right one and made it possible to circumscribe the accident. He found considerable radioactivity in 723, solid proof that the magnesium had given way completely.

The figures for 722 and 724 were less abnormal, but still definitely abnormal. For 721 . . .

"And the temperature?" Michel broke in.

The engineer shook his head, taken aback. He was being asked for a piece of information that was outside his brief. All he could say was that the temperatures he had noted had no relation with those in the rods at the critical moment—those that had caused the rupture of the metal.

Michel's bitterness grew. He was without a capital piece of information on the cause of what had happened, and enquirers would always be without it! But how could one blame Labarsouques for that? The technician had done his job, it was not his business that French science—or simply science—should at this moment add to its resources.

In other words, if anyone was to be blamed in the present obscurity, it would be Michel, a man who for years had centred his thoughts on the Problem . . . in vain.

"All the same, I can't go to bed in one of the cans!" he growled—under his breath so that no one might hear.

One of the technicians was calling M. Renoir :

"Monsieur Cahuzac on the phone for you. At the centre desk."

Michel grabbed the receiver.

"Renoir," he muttered, still watching Labarsouques' great bony head.

The jerky voice of the head of Security twittered in the ear-piece. Would Renoir present his excuses to Launay if he missed the meeting. His people were on to something—he did not say what. But he could already, in spite of his most valuable detector having been stolen, guarantee that the air all round the Centre was perfectly healthy. There had certainly not been a spread of radioactive dust.

Michel, who had put down the receiver without speaking, thought gratefully of Aubier's filters. They had made it impossible for strontium, caesium and the other horrors produced in the rods at the same time as plutonium to escape, although those pests were only too anxious to spread about the landscape and would, if they could, have used the wings of the mistral to poison

grass and trees over many leagues. Ouf ! Damezan was not going to be like Windscale.

Michel realized that Labarsouques was looking at him, and his feeling of relief vanished. A paean of victory because a supplementary misfortune had not occurred? Nothing could alter the fact of that major slug-burst, which would mean weeks, if not months, of delay.

And that was perhaps putting things at their best.

"Let's go to your office," he muttered to Jacques. "Labarsouques will go on with his investigations. Someone tell us as soon as Launay arrives. Anyhow I shan't keep you long."

For the future too existed, as imperturbable as the present.

Michel led the way into a large, bright room, whose calm, after the activity of the control room, made it seem like a garden. He made for the window, pressed his head against the glass for a second, then turned about.

"Can you explain," he said with irritation, "the mystery of how you all managed to arrive before me?"

"Pure chance."

The engineer shrugged his shoulders and smiled. He had answered without hesitation. He could guess what was going on in his friend's mind and, out of kindness, was trying to minimize the affair.

"All the same, how?" Michel insisted with painful intensity.

"Oh ! Launay hadn't left the Centre—you must have set him fussing this afternoon. Neither had Cahuzac. As for me, they picked me up at home while I was doing my homework—I hadn't taken off my shoes. No more to it than that."

Was he telling the truth? One point seemed beyond doubt : Michel, said by his men to bear a charmed life during the war, was an unlucky man in his professional life. One doesn't entrust nuclear reactors to a man who is on bad terms with the obscure forces that subject machines to their caprices. So . . .

"Swear to me," he said to Jacques, roughly, "that you don't bear me any ill-will for having dragged you into these damned problems. If you'd stayed with your railways, you'd have slept well at night."

The reply came at once :

"I don't confuse happiness with carpet slippers ! I assure you I never look back regretfully to my railways. But you

don't deserve to be answered : you know what I think, better than I do . . ."

Some time passed. The two men remained silent. Beyond the window, in the darkness outside, Michel seemed to see, in some strange way, the outline of André Thomas-Laborde. An illusion, but what did it mean?

"Thanks," he said at last, sitting down behind the desk as though it were his. "On a night like this, a little companionship does no harm. One of the first of the South Pole explorers had the courage to write : 'There is less life in a stone than in a bird,' and I imagine some supposedly intelligent people would endorse that. Poor things. You at any rate have the sense—haven't you?—of all the universes passing by us on all sides, projected by uranium? To explore the South Pole—that's all right; but we too have our Baffin Bays, and I declare there's more life in our reactor than in a ship's mast."

There were tears in the engineer's eyes, and he turned away to hide them. He admired the lyricism with which, for a brief moment, his friend treated defeat. To give himself countenance he looked at his wrist watch. He whistled.

"Three minutes to go. I've a thermos in the drawer, let's have a cup of coffee. You're done to the world."

Michel laughed. The magnesium, too, was done to the world. No physical repose for Boussot or for Renoir before they had seen the Director !

In silence they let the heavy, poignant, nocturnal seconds go by. All those fertile seconds of which the splendid grains of uranium could no longer take advantage.

At 1.07 precisely the telephone rang. Boussot took the call, and Michel, hypersensitized, recognized the voice of Launay. The Director's words flew out into space. Meeting postponed by half an hour. Note this, 1.37, in the control room.

"Sir," said Boussot, "major slug-burst confirmed. Labarsouques has given us radioactivity figures that leave no doubt."

"Right. In half an hour."

As his friend put down the receiver, Michel stood up and walked hesitantly to the window. He had pulled out his handkerchief and was mopping his forehead. There was a mist before his eyes. On the day when he had vowed to be not only like

Aubier but like Launay, he had not realized what a difficult programme that was—and yet the programme must remain unchanged. Suddenly he opened the window. A rush of howling air leapt at his face. Like the sound of the alarms assailing Labar-souques. Careless of the biting cold, he held out his hands, moved them forward, withdrew them, moved them forward again, filled with respect for that prodigious physico-chemical complex of violence and crystal, that fluid night which the machine under his supervision had not succeeded in poisoning. A diagram of the beauty of the world, the shapes of the constellations, pierced the sky.

“Come on, old chap, a drop of coffee and then back to the control room.”

A thermos bottle, two cups, two spoons and a sugar bowl had made their appearance on the desk. This picnic spread swore with the cold, clear lines of the room, but it represented, evidently, nothing more than a vulgar, complacent hypothesis which would be crossed out before a minute was up.

Indeed the coffee itself was in the conspiracy : the black liquid, kept warm behind its glass and steel sheath, had the drab, tired taste of the air one breathes in a night train when all the windows are shut. Was there really, at that moment, no radar signal forcing Martineau to wake up? Was he not sitting up, with his heart throbbing, on his hot bunk, and hearing the axles of the train hammering against the night and chanting, like a crowd of rioters :

‘Plu-to-nium ! . . . Plu-to-nium ! . . . Plu-to-nium ! . . .’

Michel’s ears were already full of the sound, in that office. He had not the strength to take more than a couple of sips. He put down the cup and, like a robot, without a gesture for his friend, walked to the door.

news : Aubier would be at Damezan before noon. (He would fly to Marignane that night, and a car from the Centre would be there to meet him.) Was not the presence of Aubier, the architect and thinker of the pile, a guarantee that things would quickly become obedient again? But Launay checked the rush of confidence with his icy voice : in the course of the telephone conversation, he said, Aubier had used the words : 'a great setback', and summed up his verdict with the phrase : 'a month's delay at least.'

As Launay thrust his chin upwards and stared at a point in space, Boussois and Renoir exchanged glances. What, they were thinking, would Martineau's reaction be? For thirty days, thirty days at least, the only pile available for industrial use in France would be unusable. Provided the efforts of the theoreticians lost none of their ardour. In crucial periods of the world's history—and the one they were living through was necessarily one of these—thirty days constituted a formidable number. In Great Britain the industry was already far enough advanced to digest without difficulty the Windscale accident, which in itself was a hundred times worse; but the French industry could not take too heavy a burden. Since it had put its money on plutonium (a good horse, and there could be no question of giving it up), elementary prudence dictated that it should have its hand on a real source of the stuff, not on a dead pile.

Launay made a wide gesture, as though driving back some invisible force.

"Towards outsiders," he murmured, "I have no need to enjoin on you absolute secrecy. As regards your colleagues, even the best of them, tell them no more than the service requires. Let me stress this."

Without any transition he called Labarsouques to him.

"Where have you got to?" he asked.

Like a pupil who takes the floor the young engineer, who had been the first to know of the collective defeat, recounted the fresh facts with which his instruments had supplied him. If he was trembling slightly, it was not perceptible, and his eyes shone with a hard light.

The group of 'brains' listened in silence, like some board of

professors. Professors fascinated by the stark figures, the observations devoid of flourishes, which the candidate projected before them—the only copy of the jerky, torn, agitated film that men had been able to take of the drama in the reactor.

When he had done, should there be questions? Renoir, Bousso and Cahuzac turned towards the Director, who smoothed his hair slowly with his hand.

"Good," he said again. "Very good."

Then :

"Labarsouques, be prepared to take a car to Marignane about nine. You will meet Aubier and give him the facts on the way back in the car. Aubier must be able, when he reaches this control room, to play about with all the relevant figures. You see what I mean? Allow yourself four hours' sleep before that. Until then, go on with your examination."

Michel had felt himself turn pale. For the first time, and with the utmost clarity, he had evidence that one of his masters regarded him, that night, with suspicion.

But Labarsouques had already whispered : "Yes, *Monsieur le Directeur*," and taken leave of them all with a nod. And now Launay's eyes turned upon Michel.

"Renoir, you are Aubier's No. 2 and therefore not under my direct authority. If you wish to go with Labarsouques, you are free to do so. All I must say to you is that I would prefer you to remain at Damezan."

There was a painful silence. Bousso had been unable to refrain from a nervous glance towards his friend. Launay was thinking. Michel waited for him to explain and did not allow himself to reply first.

What words should he use? As usual, the Director intended to express what he thought and only what he thought. He realized that he might have hurt Renoir's feelings, a thing he had no desire to do, but he was also thinking that the causes of what had happened were still so obscure that a technical error on the part of even the cleverest or most conscientious man was not excluded. Perhaps it would be no bad thing to humiliate a subtle scientific thinker in order to force him to sharpen his thought still more. To rebuke Renoir, with whom, since that morning, one had been living in a fraternal communion of research or

of disquiet—did it not come to the same thing as to rebuke oneself?

“Follow my reasoning,” he said suddenly, using the imperative to conceal his embarrassment. “You have already, without realizing it, constructed a theory to explain our accident, and, without realizing it, you would be in danger of influencing Aubier’s ideas. And he needs, to begin with, to submit to the information cold.”

His fingers were kneading the air powerfully, as though it had been clay.

“Or what seems to us such,” he murmured, quite softly, with a strange mildness.

He would gladly have added that obviously, later on, Aubier and Renoir would find great advantage in bringing their views face to face. He was incapable of saying anything more. After all, he relied on Aubier and on Renoir to do so. It might be more discreet to say nothing. Even if the ‘preference’ he had mentioned would be singularly like an order. He turned on his heel and walked to the door. Michel had not answered.

Two hours went by. Each of them as long as several nights. With their minds at highest tension, Jacques and Michel had remained in the control room to check, with Labarsouques, the working of the recording instruments; they had barely had time even once, when their eyes met, to guess that a certain thought was still in both their minds.

But at length a fourth calculation of the co-ordinates of the accident yielded the same figures as the first, second and third. And the moment was drawing near when Labarsouques should go and get his sleep.

“I’ll put a call through in your office,” Michel muttered. “You’ll come with me?”

Boussot gave his orders, and a minute later the two men went out.

The air in the luminous gallery, where the huge vulgar gaiety of the noise of the fan was now lacking, seemed empty.

The door opened on to the large clean office. The right room for a modern technician, conceived and furnished for sober reflection and rapid decision. But the thought that the pile was no longer working clouded their minds, and those precise walls, that

rubber carpet and that long bare table—all these things gave an impression simply of waste.

Michel had sat down without a word, in Jacques' chair. He took up the receiver : "I want Saclay."

The exchange worked at the same speed by night as by day. One difference only : it was the voice of a man that now answered. Naturally, he thought : nuclear energy doesn't smell of face powder.

Crossing the Massif Central, Sologne and Beauce, the scientist's call reached the suburbs of Paris.

"Saclay on the line."

"Hello. Saclay? Monsieur Martineau will be coming this morning to Post 23.⁴ Will you please leave him a message, asking him to ring me as soon as he arrives? He is to ask for Renoir at Damezan. Will you repeat that, please?"

A few seconds later Michel put the receiver down. He looked at Boussoit and winked.

"There at least is someone," he said with a wry smile, "*he* won't prevent me from speaking to."

"How do you know?" replied the other, winking back. "I can just see *him* telephoning Saclay to send one of their people to intercept Martineau at the Gare de Lyon and to ask the said Martineau to ring him at once."

Michel could not help laughing. He reflected that, if he had been director of the Centre, he would have done as Boussoit suggested.

There was a silence. Then Jacques spoke again. He had become very grave.

"Sincerely," he declared, "I don't think *he* meant to hurt you. He has too high an opinion of you. And of the team we form . . . On a night like this I hope you'll allow a subaltern like me to talk to you familiarly? The success of us all is in question. Or at any rate, may be."

Michel carefully took off his wrist watch and placed it in front of him on a piece of red blotting-paper.

"We've ten minutes before we go back to Labarsouques and relieve him," he observed tonelessly.

And then, gloomily :

"Whether or not *he* was trying to hurt me, the result is the

same. I was already in a false position, from now on I'm in a falsier one."

Jacques had drawn his chair up to the desk, so that he could rest his hands on it. He leaned forward and answered :

"It's a matter of a few hours, perhaps of a day; after that, everything will become clear."

Michel half closed his eyes ironically, but made no reply. Wisdom and his superior rank demanded it. He had not the right to confess that he was afraid he might feel guilty of the accident to the pile. Nor to confide in his friend all the curious, only half precise allusions which he had heard during the day to the direction of nuclear reactors in the future.

For light to return, it would take at least the thirty days of which Aubier had spoken . . . And perhaps it would never return.

"For the first time," Jacques resumed after a silence, "I think I see on your face something like discouragement. Come, come, old chap, tell me off, tell me I'm wrong. Michel Renoir discouraged? It's not possible."

And as his friend still said nothing :

"I suppose you're thinking of your wife and children."

On the other side of the desk a nervous hand moved down to the wrist watch, touched it and hesitated to take it up.

"I'm not discouraged, but disappointed," said Michel. "Indeed, I flatter myself the scientist in me will never be affected by shocks from outside. One must simply admit that the said scientist is perhaps not worth much."

And he went on, very quickly :

"As for my wife and children, it's no use bringing them in. I've made a mess of all that side of my life. I don't love my wife any more, and I've reached the stage of wondering whether I ever loved her! Of the three children I've had by her, only one matters to me—my son—but the other two—the daughters—who are absolutely like their mother—mean practically nothing to me. That's how things are."

He stood up. Regretfully Jacques did the same.

"That too will come clear, old chap," he murmured. "Just now you're making it all worse. A man of your intelligence and character can't have made such a mess of his family life. I've only met Madame Renoir once . . . but—"

Michel had shrugged his shoulders :

"How simple you are ! One can't possibly be angry with you. But I swear to you that a woman's smile can be as deceptive as a fine chart of the charging of a reactor. If ever I died, my wife would remarry in three months, without turning a hair. There's a certain faithful sighing suitor—yes, old chap, a geneticist—whom she keeps put aside, waiting for a sign . . . She never loved me."

He could feel his voice cracking as though he had just revealed a poignant grief. He was not so sure that he believed in the truth of what he had said. A hatred towards Juliette rose up in him.

"Enough of that," he snapped. "Back to the control room. We'll leave those things outside, as Mohammedans leave their shoes on the threshold of the mosque. Our job now is to become chemical particles, and we certainly shan't manage it if we turn up with our human pettinesses about us."

THE POINT OF THE NIB, PRESSED TOO HARD, WENT THROUGH the paper and broke. Michel swore. He could not find a good opening phrase. It was at least the fifth time he had tried and failed. He threw the piece of paper into the waste paper basket and took another.

To dictate to Mme Vauvert would have been enough to make his inspiration resume its usual play, but this was a confidential report. It would be for the eyes of five persons only. Mme Vauvert was as silent as the grave on all documents that passed through her hands, but this time it was better not to run the slightest risk.

The thought of risk once more awakened recent and extremely painful memories. The man could feel his heart throbbing and he had a rush of blood to the head. This irritated him. He took another pen and scribbled ten words or so. Again he crossed out what he had written.

He looked up at the window with exasperation. Beyond the glass a wide white sky was coming into existence. To think that that was called the beginning of a day.

More like a continuation of night, he thought bitterly. He was haunted by images. They seemed to be stuck to his eyes, glued among the lashes like flies.

In point of fact, how many days can I hope to live before I die? . . . He was being, he considered, perfectly ridiculous. When he should have been concentrating on the task, here he was, wasting his time by evoking death, that old whore of the novelists and poets! To the devil with death—men of science were not afraid of her! He had already been in close touch with her so many times during the war. In North Africa when a bullet had wounded him in the shoulder; in Italy when his car had piled up in the mountains; in Alsace when an aeroplane had crashed ten yards away from him. Poor death! She had breathed her foul breath in his face and growled her stupid threats. In vain. She was worth exactly zero.

Zero, too, the insidious dangers that had better not be named. Why wait for a decision? He was alive and looking at the light, and a youthful surge of blood ran through his vigorous body, freed in an instant from the whole load of the night's fatigue. Besides, this was not a day that was beginning, but an epoch. No use denying facts: the secrets of matter, by showing during the night that they were still defending themselves, had merely joined and won a rearguard action. Under the blows of modern science they were succumbing, melting away at a swifter and swifter rhythm. When reactors *F* and *G*, powerful as two Kilimanjaros, and as precise and easily controlled as Swiss watches, went into action, the children of men would recognize, before many years, that nuclear energy was keeping all its promises.

A fierce cramp shot through his right leg. He put his hand down to massage its skin and at that moment the telephone rang. He felt as though a drill was spinning in his head and realized that he had just been indulging in illusions; the truth was, he was all in.

Launay? Boussot? Cahuzac? He picked up the receiver. It was Boussot.

"Simply to know how you were." There was a deceptive nonchalance in his friend's voice. "Feeling all right?"

"Grand."

"I'm glad. Hmm. During the night you told me certain things

in confidence; I didn't like to pry, but . . . Hmm . . . our friends' troubles are our own, and if at any time you want to go on . . . A man like you, with such a future before him . . ."

"I said nothing last night: you dreamt it," Michel broke in, in a tone of voice that excluded any reply. "Goodbye now, I've work to do; and that's all that matters."

Outside, the white of the sky was turning to periwinkle blue. A ring-dove flapped its wings. Sounds of tyres on gravel and cars pulling up showed that people were arriving. In a minute or less, Mme Vauvert and her pony-tail would be coming into the room. The deceptive gentleness of the world's obedient stir! If, in the middle of the night, a certain filter had suddenly given way, not a single car would this morning have come up to the Damezan plateau with its workers reading newspapers or knitting, and fear would have been on the prowl through all the neighbouring villages.

The pen was unwittingly drawing a picture of *A*'s chimney. The deflector deserved to be shown by shading . . . Michel stopped doodling and remained in thought: the tall and haughty chimney had, like himself, experienced its moment of truth that night. The fire of trial in action was alone capable of establishing the real value of a filter or of a man. If the radioactive dust had got through, no one would have dared to speak of the extreme care with which an apparatus had been thought out, made and placed. If Michel did not manage to dominate himself or to contain the Problem, his superiors would not be long in forgetting all the brilliant work he had done as a young specialist.

Precisely. The first line of the report was still not written . . .

A light tap on the door.

Cool and smiling and carrying a newspaper, Mme Vauvert flew in like a bird, before he had time to think of answering. She caught sight of Michel and stopped short. Her master's face looked so different from other days. Suddenly aged, it was true, by deep lines on either side of the nose, but at the same time more full of light.

"Good morning, sir," she stammered.

He smiled like a child and felt his cheeks: "Missing a shave in the morning turns a man into a scarecrow!"

She bent her head silently, as if to say she had noticed nothing.

"Were you bringing me a paper?"

"Yes, I was."

She put down in front of Michel a page from the *Petit Languedocien*, on which she had ringed with red a long article.

"The b—f—s," he let slip, in spite of himself, as he read the name Windscale in its title, "they must have sensation at any price! As if they hadn't enough to satisfy their clients with their cycle races, *pétanque* and the price of vine stocks."

He devoured the phrases of the newspaper at full speed, in a passionate fury. It all seemed correct, though none the less painful. One could tell the expressions of the agency dispatch had been copied out straight . . . But suddenly he saw red: the half-wit sub-editor, carried away by his own demagoguery as defender of the vine and apricot, had had the face to adopt the miserable trumpet tones of panic:

'It is certain that such events, now that they have been revealed by an official report with every guarantee of authenticity, will give rise to considerable comment in our district. We have no right to doubt that every precaution has been taken in the nuclear energy Centres which have recently been established here, but one can never be sufficiently vigilant. Our brave people in the Midi have the right to insist that advantage is not taken of their civic sense.'

The rag quivered in Michel's hand as, in a flash, he lived through the night of alarm once more. It was rather a different thing, wasn't it, from helping a cow to calve? Or from drinking a *pastis* in the shade of the plane trees? To think that always, from the beginning, the strong had had to sacrifice themselves for the mediocre.

He could have let out a yell. But one must not upset the staff, it would be bad for the Centre. And besides, how infuriating to think that Juliette, in Paris, would be lapping up equally stupid articles.

"Journalists are absurd," he declared with a broad smile. "Their advice comes after the battle. Here, at Damezan, we're not afraid, because we impose on ourselves the strictest safety

drill. But you must have noticed, this morning, that you don't hear the fan going?"

"That's true, sir."

"We've stopped the pile, to enable us to make a general check-up, which will last for some days. The delay modifies our programme somewhat, but we're not barbarians—we were anxious to take public feeling into account."

"And you've stayed up all night at the Centre . . ." Mme Vauvert chimed in, in a voice full of emotion.

"Of course."

He lowered his eyes. Such easy lying was dull.

The silence continued. Michel pretended to be rereading the article. At length the siren from one of the building yards sounded, summoning its workers.

His secretary walked to the door.

"I expect, sir, you're waiting for several telephone calls. Shall I go and get you some coffee from the canteen?"

"No, thanks, Madame Vauvert, I don't need it."

She sighed softly and went out. Women are all the same, he thought: gentleness on the surface, tyranny underneath. Ancient example, Delilah. Modern example, Juliette. Martineau knows what he's doing when he stays celibate. You give way for a moment, rest your head on their shoulders, go to bed with them—and there you are, their property. Martineau . . . He looked at his watch. In less than two minutes, if all went well, the telephone should ring: it was not worth while to start work again, looking for that opening sentence which still eluded him.

He went and stood in front of the window, pressing his forehead against the glass (that was a reality that didn't deceive you!), and an immediate association of ideas plunged him back into the night hours when he had talked with Bousset. He had had the face to reveal all his weaknesses—well, he wouldn't do it again.

He sat down at his desk. With a slightly mocking expression that concealed a good deal of apprehension, he stared at the telephone from which, at any other time, the voice of Plutonius Martineau would not have failed to issue, as certainly as that $e = mc^2$. Dear Martineau, he thought, if, as I hope, I am the

first to tell you, don't scold me. I've never ceased to think of you. The pile will start up again. The essential thing is that your vats should receive their plutonium in time. On this point . . .

The telephone rang.

"Monsieur Renoir, it's . . ."

He shouted joyfully into the telephone :

". . . Monsieur Martineau !"

His secretary, dumbfounded, put down her receiver. 'He knows everything,' she thought.

"Renoir? I've got your message. Anything happened?"

Bravo! He had got there before Launay. Dear Launay after all had not been too mistrustful.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"A . . . hitch at the pile. One of the cans caught fire. A scheme-mozzle. A bloody bore because of the delay, but really it was inevitable. Aubier will be with us this morning. Rest assured we're not forgetting plutonium."

A silence. Martineau, in Paris, was taking the shock and, brave man that he was, measuring up to his disappointment.

"Bloody bore for you?" Michel resumed.

The man at the other end gave an odd sigh that ended in a sort of laugh.

"Put yourself in my place, or in the place of the plant I'm building, and you'll admit it's no joke. A certain Martineau has no use, no use at all, for a factory that isn't working and isn't producing a thing . . . But I've no hard feelings towards you; you can rest assured of that."

"Thanks, old man."

A silence. Michel, moved by his friend's superior calm, made himself a promise to prove worthy of it. He would accept all the affronts. Those from the pile as well as those from his chiefs.

"Is it too soon for anyone to have an idea of the length of delay?" said Plutonium.

Michel gave him the figure Aubier had suggested. Martineau made no comment. He merely asked if his presence would be of any use.

"Not as far as I know, at least for the moment," Michel answered. "What has just happened is as normal as 'flu or mumps.

We'll cure it. I warned you so that you could at once lop something off from the total amount of plutonium you were hoping for."

"Right."

As soon as he had put back the receiver, Michel had turned again, with a lighter heart, to the beginning of his report.

'For the last fortnight,' he wrote, 'our particular attention had been attracted by . . .'

He went no further. Attracted by what? To say that a scientific report is not nourished by vague terms was an understatement: a scientific report must contain only real facts. To assign a precise object to an uneasiness that had never had one was to fly in the face of truth.

Enough time wasted. He would dictate the thing to Mme Vauvert: words and ideas would come as usual . . .

No, never.

He had reached that point when the telephone rang again. Martineau once more? Michel took up the receiver and, with no pleasure at all, heard the Director's voice.

In a supremely neutral tone—one felt that the voice could never be anything but cold—Launay, after mentioning that Labarsouques had just left, asked: "Did Martineau take it well?"

Michel, caught short, could think of no answer.

The other man did not seem put out by this. He said, after a silence, that he himself would have preferred to wait for Aubier's diagnosis before warning Martineau. And then, as if his preceding question no longer had any point, he remarked: "I must leave you now. This morning's *Petit Languedocien* has published a superbly stupid article, which I must deal with in twenty-five minutes . . ."

That, thought Michel, as he put the receiver down, is what the life of a Director of the Centre is like. A thousand tasks, one after the other . . . Perhaps. But to say that didn't put things right. Incessantly, cruelly, he repeated to himself the phrase that had hurt him just now.

'Did Martineau take it well?'

And it hurt him more and more . . .

When he had had enough, he got up and, without even tidy-

ing up his papers or letting his secretary know, went hurriedly out. To the control room? Ah, no, not now. To the pile? That admirable machine-monument which tripped up the plans of men but did not try to torment them!

Eternity hovered over the high, silent nave, in which the gigantic block seemed well at ease in its useless repose.

Even this feeling was deceptive. One must beware of radiation. Cut short the visit. The cap of element 723 was like one of those huge burnt-out pine-trees that seem unwilling to appear dead.

Michel's wrist watch said 11.35 when Mme Vauvert put through a call from M. Launay.

"I have Aubier in my office, I am putting him through to you," said the Director in one breath.

"Renoir?" asked a grave voice.

"Yes," said Michel, closing his eyes in order to register the too familiar word he had just heard and to divine, if he could, whether—yes or no—Aubier was blaming him for the accident.

It was impossible to be sure.

"Renoir," the other went on, "this is what I propose. Let's meet in half an hour in the control room. We'll lunch together and talk it over. Then, in the afternoon, I'll let you off, and see that you get some rest."

"All right," Michel murmured without thinking.

He had put down the receiver.

He stood up and, like a schoolboy to whom any excuse was good enough for not working, looked out of the window at the blue sky and the bright distance.

And yet he was following hard two difficult trains of thought.

10

WHAT WAS THE POINT OF TURNING DOWN THAT CART TRACK? But again, why not? The Vedette slowed down and turned to the right. The grass sang under the tyres. A small stone shot from

under one of them—he did not see where it fell. Larks flew up out of the vines, on which the last bunches of dark blue grapes still hung. Michel drove on for a hundred yards, then stopped. Up there, in the azure, the long goose feather drawn by an aeroplane in the stratosphere was spreading out.

The solitary man lit a cigarette, taking his time. An odd way of spending time, wasn't it? To come here. But the fault lay with Launay and Aubier and their suspicions.

What was the use of grumbling? As if he had not been the first to suspect himself!

The vague terms he had used on a certain evening to get rid of Labarsouques, could, at a pinch, be justified: the technicians' knowledge of the ways of the pile was still too imprecise. But such a defence only made matters worse. As No. 2 to Aubier, he should be supporting his chief by clearing the way. It was for Aubier to think and to create and for his follower to criticize, to consolidate the creation. But that was what Michel Renoir had been unable to do. Several times he had thought he was closing in upon the Problem. No more than that.

Dismayed by such an implacable verdict, in which he could see no flaw, he threw his cigarette out of the car. He would have liked to feel rising up in him a great surge of disdain, if not hatred, for the new, pretentious science which was involving him in all these humiliations. It was impossible. If anything, he marvelled still more at the strange, but rich, realms into whose entrance he was groping his way.

Aubier? Aubier just now had not said a single severe word. Not a phrase with the least resemblance to an allusion. A true friend . . . But what power that gave him! He would strike later, and without remorse, if he thought fit.

And—was it not the truth!—he would think fit.

Michel passed his hand over his forehead. He would not let himself answer that . . . A moment later the Vedette was moving in reverse. Its driver, who was not looking what he was doing, failed to see a large ordnance-survey post. For the second time in twenty-four hours he scraped the bodywork of his car.

We ought to get a compensation allowance for intellectual stress, was all he said to himself.

The car crossed a culvert, crushed some dirty, green-spotted cartons and reached the smooth macadam. He stopped, then moved forwards.

Three kilometres further on, in the first hamlet, Michel's eyes were caught by an old café with lavender-blue shutters—'*A la Gaité Champêtre*', proprietor Bouissonnoux—and with the usual notice by the door: *Téléphone Poste Public*. He braked sharply and parked in an empty space. Was it a caprice? Even intellectual jokes have helped science in its advance. When Damezan treated its servants so roughly, it was natural to look for other support.

He pushed aside the bead curtain. Curled up on a cane stool, a solitary grey cat half opened its eyes and closed them again. Askew on the mildewed wall a dirty clock said 4.5.

Nobody there?

Getting no reply, he made for the red booth that stood in the corner. The cat slid from the stool on to the floor, stretched and mewed, but still nobody came.

He shut the door of the booth behind him. He had no need to worry about the number of the call box: a person unknown had carved it deeply, with knife and nail, on the varnished woodwork. This was happening in the twentieth century. Fifteen kilometres away from a nuclear energy Centre . . .

Disgusted, he brought himself to ask for Paris only with the intention of giving up if he had to wait; but a sing-song voice promised to put him through in a minute. And now for—

"Halo. Is that Louise? It's Monsieur . . ."

A miserable thing, language. At three o'clock in the small hours of that night, *Monsieur* had made a proud figure, had he not, when the pile had played its trick on him and when, humiliated by Launay, he had confessed in the lap of Bousso?

"Is Madame there?"

"No, Monsieur, I'm sorry, Madame is out. Can you give a message?"

"It's not worth it, thanks."

"Would Monsieur like Madame to ring him back?"

"Don't worry *Au revoir*."

He was deeply disappointed. Of course, she would not have

failed to bludgeon him with the article on Windscale, but after all he would have had her on the line, entangled by words, to be abused and frightened as he wished.

Madame, as he ought to have guessed, had gone out. To lick the shop windows of the Faubourg Saint Honoré, to listen to some lecture or other, to make small talk in one, in two, in three drawing-rooms. That was what he had married. A little apparatus for being seen about Paris.

Poor Boussot, who had talked of reconciling them! There is no reconciliation between nullity and a man. There was nothing for him to do but let things take their course. After taking one precaution—that of removing the upbringing of Michel junior as quickly as possible from Juliette's control. He would take care of that himself.

He left the booth and found himself face to face with an old woman, with a black shawl over her head, who stared at him ironically. On either side of her long bony face, earrings hung down like cattle bells.

"A call to Paris," she said, "costs . . ."

"Five hundred francs including the tax for listening in," Michel broke in. He had already taken out his wallet.

The woman smiled broadly.

"Come now, you weren't sorry when your lady wasn't at home . . . Old age, I can tell you, hasn't many pleasures. Telephone conversations are my little cinema."

"In nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand," he answered coldly, "the things people say to each other have no interest of any sort."

The old woman was past the age of blushing, but she was annoyed. She adjusted her glasses and stared at him: he was moving quietly towards the door.

"I'm not scientist enough to count up the fools," she shouted, "but I do know this, saying goodbye never scorched anyone's tongue."

Michel shrugged his shoulders and went out without a word.

He would go back to Nouvillargues. But, since he seemed alone in the world, by a roundabout way. Which would allow him, at the same time, to think about the Problem. Simply for

his own satisfaction. Individual careers come to grief, but scientific difficulties are still themselves. Those who misjudged Michel Renoir would be astonished if they had an inkling of the work his subconscious was doing at that moment! Michel's eyes projected, ceaselessly, on to the landscape, in fine, clear images, synoptic charts, end-caps and graphite rods; and the continuous speed of the car boring through space sent his thoughts rushing madly, like a rocket through the starry darknesses of the reactor.

About ten kilometres farther along the road he came to where a Minister, whom he had agreed one day to show over the Centre, had pointed out to him a stretch of landscape that was pure Tuscany. Perhaps it was only a futile remark, and Michael was still far from turning into a lover of external nature, but professional honesty obliged him to make sure. What was it that people—whether ministers or not—had in mind when they celebrated the Italian character of this region of Languedoc? Is there a science of landscape? . . . The Vedette began to eat up the kilometres. Michel gazed docilely at the trees and rocky outcrops, the blue sky and the vines. A chain reaction of heights, fissures, bare patches of earth and grey rocks. The whole of this geography of French molecules had been in mortal danger that night. The cypresses standing motionless on the hill crests like posts marking a geodesic seemed still stricken with stupor.

And where, in this, was Italy concealed? The red and golden waves of the vines, the clumps of pines and holm-oaks, and the distant glimpse of the waters of the Rhône, gay with a bar of sparkling light, had a savour that was too much their own. Was the light Italian? People could think of nothing but landscape to talk of . . . Goodbye, Tuscany! After the mistral it was a wonderful day, warm, bright and orderly: that was all that mattered.

Michel stopped to see where he was on the map. Tarascon, Remoulins, Arles . . . He started up again. The pigeons belonging to a farm nearby rose in a flock from the field where they were feeding and began wheeling in a circle.

Ahead, coming towards him, was something that looked like a woman on a bicycle. She was pedalling hard, head lowered

like a runner. Bravo, mademoiselle ! But you're in the middle of the road, you must be mad. He hooted and at the same time accelerated. Get out of the way, idiot ! She came straight on. Michel's hands tightened, the idea that an accident was unavoidable gripped him, and against his will he accelerated.

At the last moment she had swerved to the right. He was sure he had not touched her, but she must have had a heavy fall. He braked very hard. The Vedette skidded and its wheels screeched over the surface. Matter was under control. A complete turn-about. The car was still right side up. He had broken his glasses. He slid quickly out. He was blinking, unable to see more than confused forms.

"Little idiot !" he shouted. "Where are you? Are you hurt?"

A hearty laugh came from the road.

"Are you worried about me? You looked as if you were intent on killing me."

"Me? . . . Me?"

It was all he could find to say. He was struck by the voice. It had disrupted his scientific train of thought from the moment he heard it. A gentle, clear voice, slightly sing-song, shaded with melancholy.

"I'm alive," she said, "shaken but intact. One of the pedals of my bicycle is bent. I think I've got off cheaply."

"I, mademoiselle, have broken my glasses."

They both laughed.

"It's more annoying than you think, because I haven't brought a spare pair."

Involuntarily he had adopted a solemn tone. He had given his number-one pair of glasses to the decontamination service that night, after visiting the pile. But how could the girl have known that?

"Well?" she asked.

"Now I can't drive my car."

"Which you drive with such *brio*."

He felt irritated. Juliette too used to twit him about his driving. A master of men and of problems doesn't do things in the same way as everybody else.

"Be careful how you express yourself."

But, ashamed of lecturing her like a bureaucrat, he immedi-

ately offered her a cigarette. She refused. He did not insist. But in his mind he was listening over again to that voice which conveyed so much substance. Suddenly, at a venture, he laid his hand on his victim's shoulder.

"Do you know how to drive a Vedette?"

"You're not proposing . . ."

He was. He expounded a plan for going and coming back again, for finding glasses—of which one thing only got through to her : that she was expected first to drive him home.

She stammered that she had not her licence with her.

"That doesn't matter," he said, and added that with him she could go anywhere.

"Are you above the law?" she said mockingly.

"Above some of them."

"Like poachers." She laughed. "And yet you can't be one."

He threw his cigarette away. He was prepared to accept from that lively voice a familiarity that he was bound, normally, to detest.

"Perhaps there is something of the poacher in a scientific researcher who's using or exploring new techniques," he confessed.

"You work at Damezan?"

"Nothing escapes you."

There was a silence. Hostile or admiring?

"I'll just park my bicycle in a field," she said, "and then I'll be with you."

He quivered and let go of her shoulder. Instinctively she looked at Michel's hand. It was as she thought. He wore a wedding ring.

"Where am I to take you?" she asked as soon as they were settled in the car.

"To Nouvillargues. The Authority's place is at the far end, on the Pampresac road."

"A high wall, isn't it? With roses, a lot of plane-trees and a cedar?"

"Are you by any chance a painter? Yes it is, mademoiselle. And also a parking place for the cars of celibates."

She made no answer. He would have liked to stroke her hand. He had used the word 'celibate' to tease her, but had only succeeded in hurting himself.

"You're not from these parts," he went on. "Your accent's too good."

"Sir . . ."

There was a silence. Could she have been bluffing when she said she could drive? Why did she not make up her mind to start?

"Are you afraid?" he whispered . . . "But after all, suppose I had been lying to you?"

"Yes, you might be the gangster who had stolen a car belonging to Monsieur Michel Renoir, engineer of the C.E.A., 18 rue Raynouard, Paris, 16^e."

"A good answer, young lady. I had forgotten the existence of that plate. Start her up, word-spinner, I'm short of time."

"Promise not to talk any more?"

He nodded emphatically.

The car drove off smoothly, silently, like a fast train. Better than Juliette, he thought, but still lacking in strength—women's muscles reach their ceiling too quickly. Chopin was right when he criticized their playing of the violent passages of Beethoven.

In spite of which, the car was covering the ground. 80. 80-85. And no treachery half-skid at the curves.

In point of fact, how old could the young person be?

The Vedette was already slowing down.

"One moment. I must ask someone here to do something about my bicycle."

"Hey diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle."

"Clever men enjoy nonsense, it seems," she snapped as she slammed the door.

If she's prepared to call me intelligent, he thought, I'm not so far from being forgiven. He felt suddenly delighted, but at the same time ridiculous: why take the trouble to think so hard about a poor young woman forced to keep him company for half an hour? He, one of the brains of Damezan! And she a girl like hundreds of others, possessing a fair aptitude for repartee, but still an ordinary, very, very ordinary girl.

A strange feeling of distress, like an alarm signal, warned him that he was now busy trying to deceive himself.

Well, he would make up his mind when he could see her face.

Anyhow the whole thing was of no importance. To get *A* going again was the only problem.

He heard a window open.

"That the chap?" said a peasant's voice.

A woman's voice which he thought he recognized answered something too quietly for him to hear. Then there was what seemed an argument.

"I've no bloody use, saving your respect, for the gentlemen of the atomic bomb," concluded the first speaker at the top of his voice, and the window closed again.

A few seconds later the girl was back beside Michel.

"Your friend has odd ideas about what goes on at Damezan," he said.

No reply. The car moved off.

"You're not dumb, and you know French," he shouted, and squeezed her arm like a student.

She had stopped the car.

"Do you really want us to drive into a ditch?" she said, and went on: "I don't care: I'm not important. Whereas you . . ."

She did not wait for an answer. He had already drawn back towards the window and the Vedette drove on.

To say 'I'm not important', even if it was meant for a joke, or even if it were true, was silly. This was certainly some village hussy, proud of serving up, yet again, phrases from a novelette.

With its engine still running, the car had drawn up by a barred gate, open and leading to a large garden.

"You're there," she said quietly.

"Drive up to the entrance, please."

Chestnuts and twigs crackled under the tyres as they moved slowly up the winding drive. Michel recognized the sounds and felt a wonderful feeling of well-being. Wasn't this full, dense fatigue, of a human animal that has held on with the patient aid of his muscles and bones, the same feeling as that of the slave when his master removes his chains? It was still possible to get free. One didn't want to die—heavens, no! . . . A sudden twittering of birds broke out high up in one of the plane-trees, and a cock let out a long, vibrant, powerful, inescapable crow.

BEFORE LEAVING HIS ROOM HE COMBED HIS HAIR AND, contrary to his habit, put scent on his handkerchief. 'Like a dandy from the *sous-préfecture* walking out with his *Dulcinea*,' he chided himself. He ran down the stairs, two at a time.

He felt ashamed as he saw himself go by in the tall glass in the hall; he was ashamed of his relaxed look. At that moment Aubier was at work. And Launay. And Boussot . . . Hesitantly he made for the terrace. He emerged. Crushed under the sunshine, the world was hot, like a nuclear reactor. Strange birds were fluttering among the trees.

He went down the steps, however, and took off his glasses as he opened the car door. A sweet womanly scent welcomed him, chasing away his scruples.

"I'm going to do a little intellectual exercise," he said as he sat down. "I shall describe you as I imagine you. Then I shall put on my glasses and compare."

She gave a childish laugh, which broke off in the middle.

"Be quick about it," she said. "I too am short of time."

"I imagine, *chère amie*, that you're dark . . ."

She had not objected to the '*chère amie*', though she had played at coldness just now . . . They're all the same.

". . . and that you wear your hair like Joan of Arc. A high forehead. Rather prominent cheekbones. A straight nose. The eyes—ah, I find the eyes difficult. You ought to have dark eyes, but I can't feel the colour. Sometimes you express yourself with blue eyes. Let's leave the eyes . . . The mouth is very delicate, with a bitter curve. The chin straight. Small ears . . . Yes, except for the eyes, I don't find it hard to construct your face. You're pretty. Don't be annoyed if I think you're no pin-up girl: you're worth more than that. The worried expression . . ."

"Stop."

He heard her lowering one of the windows.

"Have I annoyed you?"

"No . . . yes . . ."

She gave a slight sniff.

"May I put on my glasses?"

"If you like."

He did so and immediately their eyes met. But she gave him no answering smile. He liked the face, and perhaps she saw that he did.

"On the whole I've won," he said calmly. "I ought to have guessed that the eyes were pale grey . . . One thing surprises me; the way you do your hair. That Récamier fashion (I'm no expert on these things) is charming, but . . ." He bit his lip. What was biting him? He would end by saying more than he meant.

"In any case, you're a pretty girl," he whispered, lowering his eyes.

"And you," she retorted, "are a rather conceited man . . . I'm going to sit behind."

He grinned. He agreed with the judgement she had just expressed. He was merely surprised that it caused him pain.

"Let my passenger sit where she likes," he said at length. "You live—?"

"Two kilometres beyond the place . . . where the accident didn't happen."

Not without ostentation, he put on a pair of new leather gloves, which he left unbuttoned, and rearranged his handkerchief. This did not prevent him from watching her as she got out. She was tall and thin, and held herself straight. Her movements were gentle and decided. Her skier's sweater, decorated with a design in green, came up to her neck. He settled in his seat like a businessman and started the car.

He examined her in the mirror. She was looking out vaguely at the landscape on the right, as it slid by.

"It's here!"

Michel put on the brakes and stopped beside a low wall of dry stones. A hundred yards farther on to the right a large isolated country house rose. It might be a century or two centuries old and seemed somewhat tumbledown. A fine creeper reddened the façade, invading the tall closed shutters of the first floor and embracing the dormers of the second. The long flat roof

was garnished with Roman tiles, salmon-pink in the evening light.

"I think I must say goodbye and thank you in spite of everything," she said in an embarrassed voice, leaning forwards towards her driver.

"It couldn't be better expressed," he kept hold of her hand. "Do you live with your family?"

She had not the strength to answer that he was being indiscreet. Perhaps already it was not true. She murmured that she lived there alone, in a house that was too big.

"But in that case," he went on, pressing her fingers, "why get out?" He felt a tremor in the fingers come and go. All was well. He continued: "I'll take you to Remoulins or to Arles, to have tea. At seven o'clock, no later, you would be home in your manor."

"You don't know me."

He looked her straight in the eyes. She sustained his glance. But he could feel that she was weakening.

"How, in that case, could I have described you so faithfully without seeing you?" he asked.

"All men know how to talk. Let's say, you're not a novice with women."

He laughed.

"Well, Remoulins or Tarascon?"

She had withdrawn her hand and was thinking, with her eyes half closed. The eyes in their slits were sparkling.

"All this coming and going," she answered. "Let me get out here. Would you like a cup of tea? In the novels I should offer you whisky, but I'm not a heroine; I'm simply Françoise Romieu, schoolmistress, on holiday for the last two years."

"Too bad for the local tea-shops! I'm getting out," he murmured gaily.

He emerged from the car and, like a teenager, combed his hair. He felt full of vigour, delivered in an instant from his fatigue and his obsessions . . . Besides, he was not being unfaithful. The ancient unknown house stood out against the sky with the same sovereign placidity as *A*, the mysterious, within the walls of its nave. Machines and human beings—everything is a field for knowledge . . . No man really lives two lives.

The girl walked over to a shed, to make sure that her bicycle had been brought back. Then she went and opened a tin letter-box nailed to a plane-tree trunk, from which she took a scruffy piece of paper folded in four. Michel turned away.

A chopping-block, an axe, a pile of logs, some sacks of anthracite, a brake from which the wheels had been removed, a half-rotted horse-collar and some harness—he stared for a minute disdainfully at all these fission products of an outworn civilization, just about good enough to find their place in a specialist's dictated report. These were things he had known as a child, that is to say in his prehistory. In a short time even the museums would have no use for them! The future first! He walked on a few steps and considered the countryside. Against a sky completely rubbed clean like a blackboard by the mistral, fields and fallow land, woods and vineyards lay stagnant in the calm of the fine evening. A thin mist was rising from the low-lying lands, drowning in its mauve veil the body of a church, whose high belfry pierced through to the full light. The red orb of the sun had suddenly withdrawn, as a snail draws in its horns, all the blazing rays whose energy-resources the technicians would soon be able to utilize, and was about to disappear behind a ridge whose jagged outlines already stood out like the teeth of a saw against the sky. Three cypresses and a round mill, caught like Chinese shadows against the amber-coloured rim of the sky, seemed like silent participants in the last act of a tragedy.

He shivered, and instinctively turned up the collar of his jacket.

"What they call the cool of the evening," she said. "But on the first floor, where I live, I've got central heating."

She took a large key from a hole in the wall.

"I'll go first, excuse me."

There was a cord hanging among the vine branches. Michel's eyes followed it upwards till they reached a small rusty bell without a clapper.

The ground floor was as cold as a cell. They went quickly through two large and almost empty rooms into a long vestibule piled higgledy-piggledy with stones, statues and fragments of pottery.

"My lumber room," she murmured.

Michel's face took on, against his will, a pitying expression. He had fallen in with a crank!

They went up a spiral staircase, which had wrought-iron banisters. She pushed aside a velvet curtain masking a door.

"My studio."

A wave of warmth. At least they would be out of the wilds. Switches clicked, glass cases emerged from the shadows.

"My museum."

And what next? he thought ironically, but his laugh stopped short.

"What's that?" he growled.

"That, as you call it, is a Gallo-Roman Virgin, which I found three years ago in some excavations. Quite near here."

Michel, who had never had time to study the history of the arts, except that of music (during the war, at times when nothing was happening), usually felt before pictures and statues a sense of inferiority that made him pass by very quickly, almost without looking at them.

But this . . .

He went closer. The small statue, upright on its pedestal in a corner, let him come. He could now see every fold of the stone, the green and violet stain at the base of the drapery, the left elbow beginning to crumble, the delicate break between the knuckles of a bent index finger. A slight sweat came out at the edge of his hair and his heart beat faster. You're being absurd, he reproached himself: fancy getting excited over a bit of stone twenty-six, no twenty-eight inches high . . . to the devil with one's critical sense! A man who knows the charge of energy packed into a single gramme of plutonium has got beyond discussing beauty in terms of inches! A breath had just passed over him. The wave-length of distant ages, which in their time had been the present day of the world, had been found once more . . . The charm of Tanagra mingled with the charm of ancient Gaul, to form an exquisite half-breed. How could one say to which dimple of the cheeks, or which part of the curve of the lips, or what strange glint in the eyes, the smile radiating from a delicate and proud face could be attributed? But it was there—light, deep and full of a tender power of avowal and defiance which made it unforgettable.

"A Virgin? Wouldn't you say it was a pagan goddess?" he asked, rather at random, glad to find a side issue to conceal his wonder.

"Certainly not. The priest I worked with had the same idea as you at first, but a great many reasons forced us to change our view. I won't go into more detail—I don't want to be pedantic."

Michel had turned his back to the statue, he could still feel, physically, its influence. As if, in that smiling marble, there was the same secret fire as in uranium.

"You work with a priest? I should have thought you were an agnostic."

"As a matter of fact I am, if that's of any interest to you. But the Abbé Chazelaud doesn't bother with that stuff when we're working together."

"May I congratulate you? It's such a valuable sideline."

He was keeping his manner deliberately commonplace, not caring if she perceived its irony. Without waiting to be invited, he walked over to a door, which he was determined to open for himself if the lady of the house did not do so first.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, placing her hand on the door handle. "I hope you'll excuse the disorder." She switched on the lights.

He followed her in, certain that he would stumble on some terrible Bohemian mess. But immediately he stopped short, feeling secretly disappointed.

"Disorder?"

"I haven't dusted anything for a month," she said with a smile.

In front of Michel a new, unexpected, long room opened out, the size of an artist's studio. This must be Mlle Romieu's room. It rose up in the midst of the ancient building like the fresh pulp of a fruit that has been picked up off the ground. The nearer and larger part of it, which seemed empty, was still in half light. His eyes, after searching it for the shine of a tourist advertisement or a glow on the tiled floor, moved beyond it of their own accord, to where the lights were concentrated, a zone warmly peopled with brown and dark-red furniture and lively carpets. Michel, at a gesture from her, had walked forwards. He was drawn towards a writing-desk, on which books were stacked. But

he was waylaid by the photograph of a man's face, which stood by a lamp on a small table.

"My fiancé," she explained calmly.

There was a silence. Michel examined the unknown man's features. A curious automatic jealousy struggled in him against an instinctive sympathy.

"I congratulate you," he answered at last.

"I met him at the sanatorium," She turned away, and added : "I owe him a lot. He died on July 12th."

The visitor wrinkled his nose. He had lost his bearings among conflicting emotions. He suddenly wanted to go away. He detested illness . . . Pride held him back. He gave the photograph a new and almost contented glance. So that fine domed forehead and those eyes filled with anxiety had belonged only to a poor consumptive.

"I must leave you for a minute," she murmured, going towards a small door. "Sit down and relax. This isn't enemy territory."

Michel did not manage to smile. He had sat down in an arm-chair. No, he would not go. He knew too little about all this. Sickness also was a fact. As real as plutonium or mercury, propane or iodine, and a man who had lightly ventured on certain laboratory experiments (at the risk of blindness or leukaemia) was not going to give way to disgust.

He stood up again and moved with decision over to the writing-desk. The books of Simone Weil, an excellent start. A great many sentences had been underlined in blue ink. The seriousness of these schoolteachers! . . . Jean Giono. A pacifist *and* collaborator. No marks. Boussot was mad on Giono, but that old Catholic had never grown out of the peasant stage—he was full of indulgence for anyone who sang the praises of Nature . . . Henri Pourrat . . . Marie Noël. After Valéry and a few bits of Aragon during the war, French poetry had been good for nothing except to dislocate one's intellect or energy . . . Albert Camus, very good . . . Françoise Sagan? He laughed. How could that muck have got in here?

Mlle Romieu was returning, pushing a trolley.

"You read Sagan?" said Michel, accusingly. "To be frank with you, you . . . disappoint me."

He noticed with pleasure that she had powdered her face, changed her shoes and exchanged her sweater for a pretty white blouse with short sleeves. He sat down on the sofa and in silence took the cup she offered him.

"I bought Sagan to form my own opinion about her," she said at last. She too sat down, but on a stool. "One can put so little trust in literary criticism written by men, when the authors they criticize are women! You band together to make fun of us! At all costs the cerebral lobes of the female sex must not be presented with the crude truth. They say the restaurants in Toulon serve 'beefsteak for a sailor'. I often wonder if the scientists and writers wouldn't—to quote the title of a best-seller—have re-created history, geography, astronomy, etc., for Juliette—that poor and charming Christian name which personifies our frivolity."

He stood up. The damned girl! She had hit the mark. No punches pulled in this remote house of Languedoc! But all the same, beware. Blue stockings often run each other down . . . Mechanically, as though about to dictate a letter, he thrust his hands into his pockets and began pacing up and down the room, frowning. He knew that he was comic and that she was watching him open-mouthed, but he could not help it.

"Was your fiancé an intellectual?" he asked, still pacing.

"Yes. A mathematician. His health had been ruined during the war, in the reprisal camps."

"I see, a brave man. I fought with the Second Armoured Division in Africa, Italy, etcetera. Couldn't they cure him?"

"He would have had to make up his mind to be treated in time."

Michel thought of the night he had just been through. Of Launay's way with overstrain . . . All those who use their whole strength to conquer a bit of truth are brothers.

"I think I should have got on with him," he said softly, bending towards the girl. Then he withdrew into the half light and refrained from speaking for a good minute.

Would she break the silence? And yet he himself felt it was becoming too heavy for the nerves to stand . . . Still she did not speak. A longing which he recognized was still rising in him.

"I'm happy with you," he said softly, still intending to go very soon, "but I'm one of those men who have no right to happiness. You couldn't have guessed, but my wife's Christian name is Juliette . . . No, don't excuse yourself, your analysis fits her like a glove. Juliette, when I . . . forced her to marry me" (it was the first time in his life that he had confessed this) "was not . . . a Juliette. But this year—!"

Now the girl stood up.

"Forgive me. I don't want you to tell me your private life."

Her mouth twisted as she said this. He was dumbfounded. He, Michel Renoir, to be taken for a chatterer?

"Please," he said, "don't complicate things by being too tactful. I can't decently blame you for having noble impulses, but if we go on like this we shall destroy a friendship which, if I'm not mistaken, is already firm. If you only knew the power exhaustion can have, in a man who has usually plenty of courage!"

"Do you think I should have invited you in if I hadn't guessed you were exhausted?" she murmured, still lower.

"Thank you . . . Don't say any more."

He had laid his hands on her shoulders, and they were gazing at each other intensely, conscious of the desire which was pushing them together, conscious also of its dangers.

As if the dangers themselves had not, all along, attracted them.

He moved his face forwards and their lips met. The signal of the end. He lifted her in his arms and carried her to the sofa. She made hardly any resistance. And even that was chiefly, though she did not suspect it, to increase the man's pleasure.

When he emerged from the strange torpor and from the dreams into which he had been unable to prevent himself from slipping like a child, he opened his eyes. On the wide ceiling of the room he tried in vain to read the indicator dials of the control room . . . Someone was weeping; he raised his head and immediately recognized *her*.

She did not suspect that he was watching her. Huddled in the hollow of his shoulder as though in her original place, with her hair in disorder, her cheeks pink and small freckles showing close to her ears, she was weeping quietly, her eyes closed, and

now and then one of the larger tears could be seen to form on the eyelashes, to hesitate and then to glide down the moist skin.

"What is it?" he murmured uneasily. He detested simpering women.

She dabbed her eyes and cheeks with a handkerchief and then, without speaking, considered him.

"Explain," he insisted. "You've no right to play the entrapped innocent. I'm not such a fool."

She shuddered and clung to him.

"No, I've no regrets, I'm happy. Don't ask more questions . . . At least, not now."

A silence. To resist the need he felt never to move again, the man sat up suddenly and picked up his wrist watch from a chair. Eight o'clock? There was Aubier who would come down from Damezan to Nouvillargues and want to talk to him. Jaunay who would perhaps ring up. The great mute pile, the uranium pyre now flameless . . .

"I must go," he said abruptly.

Françoise too sat up, immediately. Hastily they dressed, with the discretion of two people long married.

On its table the photograph of the dead fiancé was looking at Michel with a kind of ironical connivance, or was it pity?

"Would you like me to come again?" he asked.

She lowered her eyes and smiled.

"That's as you wish, or as you can . . . I'm nothing."

Again that deplorable false modesty! But he could think of no mocking reply. He did not even shrug his shoulders.

'I'm nothing' would have made a good *leit-motif* for the particles of matter—which in the end are everything.

He had possessed this woman. And satisfied on her flesh his sudden male desire. But after the flare-up there remained in him a new gentleness, an invisible wedding-ring which he could not destroy.

Always Samson and Delilah.

Forewarned was not forearmed . . . Never any escape from the problem of daring and prudence—on the Damezan plateau or in welcoming rooms.

She was leading the way out. She too dared say no more, and

when he stopped by the Gallo-Roman statue she refrained from uttering a word, in order to respect his meditation.

Humanity, he was thinking—as that pure outline proclaimed clearly enough—had not waited for the discovery of nuclear energy and its prodigious developments before trying to live. That might be so, but had it at least, in those past ages, aspired to such a discovery? Had it shown that it felt the lack of such a discovery for the perfection of its sense of wisdom and beauty? One would not be justified in answering yes. The fact that there was no breach between the modern mind and that ancient statue, which the earth had just restored to the light, might be interpreted in two contradictory ways.

That woman's form, already buried for quite a time as though dead, was as young, as fresh, as the searing pencil of an interplanetary rocket at the moment when its thunderbolt sinks into the flesh of the sky.

The dry, rough cold of the huge night seemed to rise out of the compact and ringing soil. Stars in their thousands were encamped over the field of the moonless firmament. Two car lights, which had been growing larger in the distance like live coals rushing over the ground, suddenly vanished. A dog barked. Why had the man, now slowly following a bad path through the fallow land, thought he was living with dramatic intensity through what was, in fact, a most commonplace moment? A dog barking, lights vanishing—those were the immediate data, and what poorer ones could a nocturnal countryside offer?

I have just left Woman, he told himself ironically; reality, as sentimental literature says it should, is revealing itself to me as much richer than before.

He felt ashamed; he was phrase-making, and insulting a human being who could not defend herself. All his new gentleness protested. He spat with disgust.

Mingled somehow with the smell of the pebbles in a dried up torrent, bitter as dust, the cosmic mystery floated in space. Yesterday, today and tomorrow—always there. Intact and inviolable, in spite of all the discoveries of science. Like that smile of the Gallo-Roman Virgin, transmuted after centuries into a witness of the

youthfulness of the dead, the adolescence of eternal matter reflected by the eyes of eternal humanity.

Michel turned back towards the large house. Light shining behind all the first-floor windows . . . How many days should he wait before coming again?

A whistle rang out on his left, forty or fifty yards away. He stopped. It was silly, he had felt alarm. But before he could think further, another whistle sounded to the right.

Whistles in the night, right out in the country, like in the times of Cartouche and Mandrin? . . . The police? Robbers? Perhaps someone had an eye on his car—he had forgotten to lock the doors and to light up . . . He was not armed. He had left the revolver in its usual place, in the glove compartment.

Slowly, on tiptoe, he moved towards the road. Memories of the Maquis and of North Africa came back to him. Dear little Françoise was courageous, living alone in her miniature castle in these harsh backwoods.

Footsteps rang out on the macadam. A mutter of voices was approaching. Michel stopped again. Vaguely, a few yards away, he could make out the shape of the car.

The voices and noises grew clearer. The people approaching had great hobnailed boots. They were wheeling bicycles. There were two of them, and they were talking a language that wasn't French.

Spanish workers in the vineyards? Italian labourers? . . . They were North African workmen in a cheerful mood. Michel, having once been a lieutenant in the Algerian infantry, recognized a few Arabic words, but the two men were talking too fast. The names Tlemcen and Oujda stood out. It might be any good story of the kind fellow-workers tell to while away a long walk.

Would they meddle with the car?

They hardly seemed to notice its existence.

Perhaps they were workmen from one of the Damezan building sites. Labourers on *B* or *C* who had been taking part all day in the preparation of the great festivals of neutrons. Not for a second did they understand the work in which they were collaborating, but it brought them a living and they brought to it their manual effort and asked no questions. A sensible arrangement.

Those two good blocks of muscle had no suspicion of the

dangers they had escaped last night, and that too was sensible: the great technicians reserve for themselves the essence of the responsibilities and worries.

Somewhere deep in the heart of the countryside, a dog barked. A motor cycle could be heard purring along a road with the quiet rhythm of a motor canoe.

The two North Africans imitated the barking, roared with laughter and moved away singing. They had not guessed that they were passing close to a man. Michel still did not move. The whistle blasts could not have come from those two simple-minded stalwarts. There were other people hiding in the darkness . . .

He rushed forward and opened the door. Nobody had leapt on him.

But how hollow the seat was. With a presentiment he switched on the lights and slipped out again. With his foot he tested the tyres. One of them was flat. Or, more exactly, someone had done the necessary to make it flat by unscrewing the valve . . . A stupid trick. Some drunk, no doubt. Conscripts from the village, perhaps, or schoolboys intoxicated by reading Tarzan . . . Provided they hadn't torn the tyre itself. He got out the pump and set to work. The fellows must be watching him from a field a few yards away and laughing up their sleeves.

Once it was pumped up, the tyre did not go down. He sat at the steering-wheel and lit a cigarette. He thought of the rude remarks of the clodhopper at whose house, not far from there, little Françoise had earlier stopped for a moment. That was one of the people who must have been stirred to a fine frenzy by those sentences in the morning's local paper. Could it be that . . . ? He opened the glove compartment. The Colt was no longer there.

Michel's fingers drummed violently on the windscreen. The cheap plot, all right in a sensational novel ! All right as a sedative before going to sleep ! But not so good when the independence of France in nuclear supplies and the promotion of a better humanity were at stake. The Maquis, disordered living, Bohemianism—they were all very well for youth. Afterwards what mattered was to begin, and leave to posterity, an achievement.

Samson and Delilah again . . . Even if the little school teacher had not lent her hand to a plot, she was to blame. Because of the

weakness, the unjustified confidence, which she had imparted to a man.

I shall never stop here again, he decided with cold fury. A 'schoolteacher on holiday'—how grotesque those official designations were! The word 'holiday' ought to be struck out of the vocabulary, it was so contradictory to the idea of life . . . A sickly-sweet ideal creature . . . The story of the sanatorium and the fiancé didn't hold water. Consumption—a matter of will-power. Those who fall ill, nine times out of ten, are people who want to.

He drove off at full speed.

He had made up his mind, he would not come again.

Part II

I

NO SOUND FROM OUTSIDE PENETRATED INTO THE SMALL WHITE room. Where were they? The harsh light from a lamp bore down on the glass panels so that the eye could not make out what was beyond—it might be a corridor or, just as well, a narrow courtyard, a plain, a forest; or the sea . . .

Michel closed his eyes. With one elbow on the table and his forehead resting on his fist he went over the last three hours. He was beginning only now to understand them. Discussions moved at such a speed, when people came to them with their opinions formed and their minds made up to defend them. All against him, of course, and he ought to have foreseen it. On the plane of ideas they all took off their hats to him. But, on the plane of facts!

Jean Muller, closing for the *n*th time the small green folder containing the file, nodded his head and looked at his friend. The moment when one relaxes after an effort—he knew what that was like. Michel was tough, he would soon recover. Muller stood up, went over and slapped him on the shoulder.

"One doesn't alter a foetus in the womb," he muttered. "Cheer up! We shall see, when *B* and *C* begin squawking!"

"Your comparison's a stupid one," Michel answered without raising his head. "One changes the feeding of a woman during pregnancy, to make her child stronger, doesn't one?"

There was a short silence, then Muller laid his hand flat on the file, as though to protect it from being gone through again.

"You knew the rules of the game, so it's too late for you to complain. One of the common errors in this country—"

"—is to fiddle about with prototypes and perpetually send them back to the designers because in the meantime, somewhere in the world, someone has made a discovery," Michel recited as if it was part of the Catechism. "Thanks all the same. It's never too late to learn."

"Sorry. But there's a lot of pride, believe me, at the back of your attitude."

Michel slowly raised an indifferent hand and made no answer. Muller, an old friend and excellent technician, had every right to be frank. Only it was ridiculous, he thought, to find fault with pride, that lever of action. I, Michel Renoir, claim that it is pride we mean nowadays when we say 'love of life'. The 'love of life' represents the gaseous state of the feeling, pride its solid state. Who can improve on that?

His thoughts grew gloomy. There were too many things they were not telling him. Why? Did they think his mind was incapable of resilience? Did they prefer to entrust the new problems to researchers who were quite fresh and were not held back so long by their critical spirit? With what alarming impetus—the vital urge of a virgin forest—science rushed ahead! Brilliant novelty was always being discarded. The principle of the wearing out of ideas was even truer, it might be said, than that of the conservation of energy. The rhythm was a thousand times faster than that of feminine intuition. Juliette . . .

Michel's eyes, busy counting the hairs on his wrist, suddenly considered his watch. 8.5. Juliette had said 8.15 at the latest, which meant half past eight. But to get from Saclay to the Rue Raynouard without a helicopter . . .

"We must be off, brother," he cried. "To end the discussion, prolonged by us in committee of two, I'm defeated but I don't accept it. I charge you with the transmission of that deep thought to Aubier and our colleagues."

Muller bowed low to right and left, to an imaginary audience, then put away the file. They went along the white and silent corridor and came out among the lights outside, without having said another word.

As if he were alone and it belonged to him, Michel made straight for his friend's car, which was parked in a dark corner. He was now in a hurry to get away. He opened the door himself and slipped in. He found the smell of rubber and varnish delicious. He had plunged his hands into his overcoat pockets, stretched out his legs and already, before the car had moved, he felt as if he had arrived in the middle of another country.

This was childish, he was ready to admit—but to himself, for it concerned only him . . .

Muller was adjusting his scarf, blowing his nose and drawing on his gloves : was not such nonchalance also very childish?

They drove off. The world of long brilliant façades and mysterious buildings, of tidy building-sites and empty avenues of tiny trees, moved past in a succession of rapid images. This was not the atomic world of Île-de-France as opposed to the separate atomic world of the Midi. Meticulous research into the infinitely small left its mark on all its places of worship : they formed a single, strict, compartmented world without smoke or clamour, a world in advance of the real world, at once an arsenal and an abbey. At that late hour there was nobody about, but in the right places the specialists were on the watch, and the site itself seemed attentive; here, as at Damezan, it was as if reserves of cerebral energy lay hidden in the ground.

It was Michel Renoir's world. Had he not, as Aubier's assistant, been a member of the first team to get to know reactors at Saclay? Was he not one of those who were intimate with the physiology of its strangest machines, which lay concealed here and there, in no apparent hierarchical order, each behind the simple cover of a wall, like the cottages of a nuclear Petit Trianon? The synchrotron, for instance—the marvellous synchrotron packed with all the complexity of a dinosaur, glittering like the medals of a general in a revue sketch and, with all that, as simple as a formal garden. What wonderful efforts the conception of these centaurs had required of scientists . . .

Then why did Michel feel as if he were running away? Saclay had no monopoly of the harsh military barbed wire which surrounded its periphery and of the blue-uniformed guards with revolvers at their belts, who seemed like the savage aboriginal population of this secret territory. It was one of the private properties of Scientific Danger, and to let it be invaded would have been a crime. And the same was true of Damezan.

Here was an odd thing : had one tried, at all costs, to establish a contrast between the two Centres, one would have been led, in daytime, to find the atmosphere at Saclay more relaxed. The stir of human beings there during those hours gave a vague feeling of the Latin Quarter. Down at Damezan, the solemn surrounding landscape seemed always on the point of demanding from the atomic scientists, with all its hills and mountains, an account of

their demoniac activity; but Saclay, where only Saclay was to be seen, never worried for an instant about the forms of the land.

Must I suppose, he wondered, that care has become my kingdom? and that wherever I perceive a trace of lightheartedness I can no longer feel really happy?

No clan pride entered in. Michel was still a Saclay man, just as much as his colleagues of a short while ago, just as much as Jean Muller.

The car slowed down at the gate, and he could not help smiling.

Between them and me there's now all the superb, savage experience I have gained at my own risk. A general staff and a battlefield don't produce the same view of things! I don't dispute their knowledge, but I claim to have got beyond. When they turn down my plan for modifying the design, they pose as the practical men—a *trompe-l'oeil*. They are advancing a thesis—that the design of a thing already building is tabu. If they had had, as I have, to watch a pile suddenly go wrong, would they show such a bigoted respect for constructions that don't yet exist?

The small car, soberly driven, was moving at a good pace through an abstract landscape of night and light. The glass roofs of factories, the lights of slug-like cars and the pools of glowing windows were flung past it by the ribbon of macadam. For kilometres on end, against a sky as empty as a cathode tube, a high tension cable dangled the strange foreground garlands of its shining insulators. Was this country? Or suburb? Or the approach of nothingness? What could not be denied, among these strange pictures, was the presence of the throbbing Problem. How long would the towns have available to them lights that made nothing of night, motors that made nothing of distance? The barrages in the Auvergne and the Pyrenees were at work, sending hither the feverish flux of their kilowatts, but they were calling for help. The oil from America and the Middle East: Resources not to be relied on. Oil from the Sahara? It would relieve them, but in time it too would be exhausted. Like the grain of mustard-seed in the Gospel—there was no reason not to use that text in the service of technological propaganda—the atom, fortunately, had answered '*adsum*'; it only remained to make it burgeon.

Michel passed his hand over his forehead. He was ready, all of a sudden, to recognize that he had been wrong. Was not the urgency of the task paramount? A programme has been decided on, one carries it out . . .

Petit-Clamart. Yellow stripes and bright lights. Heavy buses. Along the edge of the sky's rose-pink salt-marsh, like the horses of gypsies among leprous reeds, lights stood out. The houses formed groups, came and went, dispersed and regrouped.

The retouching an amateur artist permits himself with his picture or statue is a dangerous proceeding when one is working on things that involve the public safety. Already unforeseen obstacles are inevitably leading to delays. In the voices of Aubier, Muller and the others I can recognize Launay's accents. Create! There will be time for talk when *B* and *C* have begun to live! If tomorrow the British and Americans move on to the industrial production of thermo-nuclear energy, all that I'm doing now will cease to count, except as a file in the archives.

Tomorrow? I'm going too fast, all the same. But how is one to know?

The car was just leaving a long straight avenue for a road that zigzagged like the Rhône Valley and went uphill. On the left, through a series of gaps, the huge encampment of the lights of Paris appeared and reappeared. A giant giraffe, the Eiffel Tower. A shadowy hollow, the Seine . . .

"Stop at that tobacconist's," Michel said. It was the first word he had spoken since they had left.

"But if you want cigarettes, old chap, I've got plenty."

"I must post a letter."

Muller said no more.

A letter—if two very short sentences without even a signature deserved the name. "You left me the choice. I have decided not to see you again." For the last fortnight this epistolary anthology-piece had lain in his notecase. Silly: a letter was made to be sent. Well, the postmark of an insignificant Paris suburb would add a contemptuous flavour.

As he moved to get out, Michel hesitated. The braying of a gramophone could be heard and the shop was called, of all names, *Au Petit Repos*! Strange notion! The whole atmosphere swore

with his memory of that beautiful far-away house. He got out.

Through the large uncurtained bay window he could see two lorry drivers having a drink at the bar with some tarts. There was a truly obscene picture for you! Take a random dip into the human ant-heap and this is what you are sure to come upon. Researchers into energy-through-fusion are working themselves to the bone for a bunch of lay-about!

A large letter-box was attached to that bawdy-house. Oh, well! It swallowed his offering.

Five to nine. The two friends were certainly late. As he pushed open the door to the block of flats, Michel winked at Muller and said there was no need to worry. A simple family dinner for a girl's birthday.

As they crossed the hall, the door to the porter's lodge opened. The imposing concierge held out a long pale-blue envelope.

"Monsieur Renoir, Madame Renoir asked me to give you this personally."

He walked on a few paces and opened the envelope noisily. For what stupidity had the luxurious writing paper been wasted? What a pitiful use for energy . . .

"A counter-order," he growled to Muller. "The dinner's at my father-in-law's Eighth *arrondissement*, Rue de Bucarest, I've forgotten the number, I'll look as we drive. I can guarantee the food will be good; but whatever happens, please note that a Member of Parliament is, by definition, a useful phenomenon."

They had already run to the car.

"Apart from that," said Michel, "if you ask me the reason for the change, I should have to answer that I know no more than you do."

He was thinking of several things at the same time. The number of the house, why the programme had been changed, thermonuclear energy.

A red traffic-light (did its power come from Génissiat or from Donzères-Mondragon?) pulled them up at the cross-roads. Michel turned to his friend:

"Do you know a chap called André Thomas-Laborde?"

"The geneticist?"

"Ah! You know the twerp!" he growled, put out.

The traffic-light turned green (more kilowatts).

"Even if one's a specialist, one tries not to lose all contact," said his friend, who had lost no time in driving on. And he smiled! "Your chap has got himself talked about. My impression is that . . ."

"André Thomas-Laborde is a bastard, and I know what I'm talking about," snapped Michel.

"Well, I never!" said Muller under his breath, taken aback by such violence.

Michel screwed up his eyes. He suspected all sorts of things. A kind of conspiracy.

"Twelve—twice six—Rue de Bucarest," he shouted triumphantly.

2

JULIETTE HAD BEEN LISTENING FOR THE SOUND OF THEIR arrival. She came out into the hall to open the front door herself.

"How late you are!" she whispered.

Michel made a face. With false nonchalance he threw his cigarette over his shoulder on to the top of the lift.

"Monsieur Jean Muller, of Saclay . . . My wife."

After simultaneous greetings the two men went in and took off their coats. Both of them had massive, broad houlders, high foreheads and pensive glasses. Science and boldness.

In her extremely low, pearl-blue, thin, rustling evening dress, caught at the waist by a red sash, the fair-haired, scented and jewelled young woman who had preceded them was feeling uneasy. She gazed about her uncertainly, pressed her hands together, rubbed and turned her wedding ring.

A lovely, empty doll, Michel was thinking. He too was embarrassed and had pulled Jean Muller to one side. He was ashamed at not feeling indifferent to his wife, and at the same time ashamed that he could not call the feeling love. The memory of his recent adventure was causing him a strange remorse.

"Notice the chandelier! Don't let it mislead you: this is the

house of an honest Member of Parliament. My father-in-law doesn't fatten himself on the sweat of the people."

He accompanied these badly-brought-up-student jokes with nudges and meaning looks, as though he wished to convey to his friend that he was a very easy husband and was leaving him a free run with the society creature who had come to meet them. A nuclear scientist might take liberties he would refuse to a Thomas-Laborde.

Juliette was anxious to recover her composure. What was needed was to show Michel that there were limits. She had only seen him this morning for ten minutes—just long enough to allow him to slave between the train and Saclay; but from his fierce and fixed expression, and from the bluff indifference of his kisses—like an uncle up from the provinces—she could feel that he was tense and thwarted by some problem. As long as he had not solved it there was no knowing what he might not do. Why did he stay on at the A.E.C.?

"I hope, monsieur, you aren't married?" she said to Muller.

Michel burst out laughing.

"Because you have someone to suggest to him?"

"No, no, of course not," she stammered, "I should never be so forward."

If ever I do marry, will things go as badly with me? Muller was wondering. He said aloud :

"Don't worry, madame. I'm a terrible old bachelor."

She began to bluster :

"Let's say, a charming celibate. And besides, celibacy doesn't always last. This very evening, perhaps . . ."

"Leave him in peace," Michel broke in "A genuine scientist only goes to bed with science. Martineau, for instance, *e tutti quanti* . . . Let's not stay here, please, we're being absurd."

They made for the drawing-room. Juliette bent towards her husband and said quickly, under her breath :

"I didn't think you were a coward." Then, abruptly : "Papa has asked some people. Don't be surprised at anything. I'll explain."

He nearly answered brutally : "So we shall see your gallant?"—but he still had the strength to stop short of that. He tapped Jean Muller on the shoulder :

"Poor chap," he muttered, "we're in for a stinking evening."

He shivered. "I've a temperature," he thought at once. Aspirin would be the thing.

A satisfied murmur had greeted the entry of the group into the old drawing-room with its subdued lighting and its plethora of ornaments, pictures and statuettes. On the grand piano a large bunch of red roses stood on the right-hand side of a smiling photograph of the late mistress of the house, Mme Jacques Laffon, with her bosom squeezed into an extremely 1910 black bodice. Michel frowned: *He* is no doubt waiting for nuclear energy to flow into the grid before getting some stronger bulls, he thought. By way of escape, his eyes strayed to the three small signed portraits of Presidents of the Republic, which were crowded into a corner behind a dusty aspidistra. But this did not console him. The idea that he was wasting his time kept galloping feverishly round his arteries. He clenched his teeth, he longed to cry out. An hour earlier, at Saclay, he had yielded to an impulse of discouragement. Now he realized he had been wrong. His colleagues' refusal was not a setback. None of them had alluded to the accident. Each of them had consented to treat it simply as a fact and to look at it from the point of view of a fairly far-ahead future -- even Martineau, harassed as he was by his plutonium; and now, in this unnatural drawing-room, Michel felt forced to believe that he still had the confidence of the high-ups. Perhaps *they* thought that Labarsouques had made a mistake (which was not true), but he, Michel, came in for no blame. *They* were still thinking of him for the reactors of the future. So the essential thing, now, was to get *A* going again. With the maximum of safeguards . . . Why could he not take wing and at one stroke be back at Damezan? There was his place, in the warm company of technical difficulties, of dangers and of precise discussions with about ten men, his friends.

He was sorry he had posted that letter to Françoise. Faced by these old wives, he realized that she too belonged to the world of Damezan. With what docility and respect she had stood up as soon as he had had to leave.

The good Dr Laffon took up his stand in front of his son-in-law, and seized hold of his wrist.

"Dear citizens of the New Worlds, come with me. They're longing to shake hands with you."

"Including Jean Muller's fiancée?"

"I don't see the joke, but I'm prepared to laugh. Come along, both of you."

They moved forwards with a too obvious resignation, but the company had expected nothing else from them and did not resent it. Now came the procession of names :

"Madame Chayriguès, such a devoted servant of Parliament, the government and the Republic . . . Mademoiselle Girardot, her niece and driver . . . Madame Guerroy and Madame Perreyve . . . Doctor Guerroy and Doctor Perreyve, two colleagues of mine at the *Chambre*; our opinions may differ on some points, but we never quarrel . . . Miss Helena Williamsca," (How do you do?) "a charming visitor from the American Universities, here to study our institutions . . . Monsieur Gustave Rabaud, another colleague from the *Chambre*, a man of conviction—and a tough one . . . Monsieur and Madame de Rétrémont; Monsieur de Rétrémont is one of our most enlightened city councillors, he has done an enormous amount to improve the lighting of our Paris streets—but you have, of course you have . . ."

The doctor sighed. He glanced towards his wife's photograph.

"And now you are leaving *terra incognita*. You, at least, my dear Michel, for I've no need to introduce Madame Bernard and Madame Loewenstein, two friends of my dear Charlotte . . ."

The two old ladies sighed.

Juliette's father had put his finger to his lips and, with a sign to Muller to move slightly away, was pushing Michel into a corner of the large room in which, between a green plant and a glass case full of Chinese or Japanese objects, two men were talking. With his crooked finger he tapped the nearest of them on the back three times.

A long silence followed the "How are you?" which came from both sides. It was several years since André Thomas-Laborde and Michel Renoir had met, and they looked at each other with an attention that was more discreet in André, more critical in Michel, but equally close in both of them. The handshake had been a rapid one.

As a good parliamentarian the doctor coughed slightly. Indeed, he had not finished with the introductions.

"I'm glad to see you again," said André suddenly, a little huskily.

He turned his eyes away, and his face with its fine features grew blank . . . A rather ordinary, good-looking dark man, he seemed. Average stature and build, a high but not excessively high forehead, smooth hair and a good tie. Although there was not more than six months between them, he looked much younger than Michel.

Michel had nodded. He knew what he knew. In this André, so sure of himself, so elegant, and surrounded by the respect of scientific circles, he persisted in seeing the tinid adolescent of long ago, the perplexed student and the deserted husband. In vain had the Laborde clan joined with the Thomas clan to make a sonorous name—what was underneath was still a poor specimen. A puppet, no doubt capable of making demagogic speeches for hours on end about the Windscale accident, but resistant to any heroism. No wonder that dull lump had ended up in genetics, a science for mediocre men, confining itself to clothing impotence and fear in vague formulae.

He took off his glasses and wiped them.

"My word," he muttered, "you're beginning to go white!"

In André's throat, above the impeccably knotted tie, the Adam's apple rose and fell.

Michel had already continued :

"In point of fact, what are you doing here instead of flirting with your frogs and ducks?"

"Allow me," Dr Laffon interrupted, concerned at the turn of events, "you'll have a chance to talk later . . . Michel, I still haven't introduced you to Monsieur Léotard."

The dry little man with whom André had just been talking bowed like a robot. He was in a dinner-jacket. Why?

"Monsieur Léotard is from the Sorbonne. He works there in a double capacity, both as teacher and as educational psychologist."

Charming, charming. André Thomas-Laborde and an educational psychologist—Juliette could hardly have sunk lower. And how natural it was to be told, by Dr Laffon, that the good Léotard had excellent ideas on the future of little Michel.

The atomic scientist began ironically :

"One word, *cher monsieur*. Since you are at the University . . ."

"Later," interrupted the doctor, resolutely. "We must go in to dinner. I must say, at the Authority they're not very punctual."

"Much the same as at the *Chambre*, I expect."

Laffon, shrugging his shoulders, led the way. Michel muttered:

"You seem to have invited the whole of the capital."

"A few friends. These people have come for your sake."

"Including Monsieur Léotard? And Monsieur Thomas-Laborde?"

"Don't be so touchy. I recommend Madame Chayriguès to your attention. She controls twelve votes in our house; one doesn't need to be an Einstein to understand what that means when it comes to an awkward division."

"A bloody bore, I'm sure."

"Not at all, you're overdoing it."

The Member of Parliament could not help laughing, in spite of everything.

"Between ourselves, entirely between ourselves . . . Perreyve . . . the chap from the Midi who rolls his 'r's' (Mont Chauve, we call him) . . . is one of the twelve. Sh! The old so-and-so would never admit it. Especially in front of his wife."

Michel's eyes had strayed, to the rosy chaps and billiard ball cranium of Dr Perreyve; but he turned irritably and looked for Jean Muller, who must also be feeling lost in this climate of futility. His glance fell on the dressy hat and heavy eyelids of Mme Chayriguès, who was busy looking him up and down and now met his eye. It was as though he had caught a thief red-handed. Odious! Ridiculous! He was being made into a farcical decoy for intriguing women. Patience, *mes petits amis*, we'll make a clean sweep. We'll impose the new world. The spirit that breathes from Damezan, Harwell and Chalk River cannot be stopped in its career.

"Swallow that," his father-in-law ordered. He had been waiting in vain for Michel to ask him if he was one of the twelve (he had prepared a witty reply) and, in the kindness of his heart, had none the less brought a glass of port.

"I've a temperature," said Michel. "An aspirin and an apéritif."

"The atom drives its people hard," cried the doctor. "I must tell you also that Madame Chayriguès is a mine of jobs. Let's suppose that one day——"

"This was prompted by Juliette, wasn't it?"

"Whether it came from Juliette or someone else, it was said in your interest. A young man like you, with a great future, may like to change his gun from one shoulder to the other. Especially if he thinks of certain high salaries that are going in private industry."

Michel stared at Dr Laffon.

"Not another word about that," he growled. And again he turned away.

Muller—the faithful Muller—had taken on all the appearance of the traitor Muller. A group had sucked him in. Extraordinary. Juliette, Mme Chayriguès' niece and André. Juliette was chatting and laughing like an idiot, and smoking a cigarette. Puffing the smoke in their faces. Enjoying herself—nervously, but enjoying herself. Her good-looking gallant was inscrutable.

Michel, on a student's impulse, tightened the knot in his tie. Why could he not yell: "Come here, Muller!"? Far away in the South, A, like a patient still too sensitive to be operated on, enfolded its shattered rods and was not working. For weeks and weeks the pile would have to wait before it could start again secreting, micron upon micron, its marvellous crumbs of plutonium. A whole chapter of French production suddenly interrupted. And even if this was only temporary, a French atomic scientist ought to have avoided facile contacts as part of his scientific penance. The inconsequences of Paris! What place could there be for André, a Vichy man, under the roof of a member of Parliament who called himself U.D.S.R.—the initials that surely still stood for '*Union Démocratique Socialiste de la Résistance*'? It was true, Juliette and Michel had chosen him as godfather to their second daughter, Pierrette, whose birthday they were supposed to be celebrating today, but this choice, which was entirely a private matter, altered nothing. Some stupid impulse of pity must have been her motive . . . Not unlike Juliette's weakness before Michel's return.

Was he going to be jealous—when he had just strayed? (But that was part of the accident to the pile, he was not going to reproach himself for that) . . . Jealous? A man who's co-operating in the building of a splendid future doesn't wear out his strength

on such primitive reactions. Creatures who shamelessly waste hours and hours under the drier at a hairdresser's, or in receiving beauty treatment, don't deserve that one should pay a moment's attention to their physical emotions. He owed it to himself to remain calm. Juliette's brilliant promise, her charm, her intelligence, her vivacity—there could be no question of regretting these, since she had loosened her grip. The willingness to learn is a gift that has to be kept up, to preserve itself till death! Let the weak go to the wall! Jealous for the sake of a woman who fell for tittle-tattle—for the scientific confidences of a duck-charmer?

Still, she's lovely. The cool beauty of that dimpled blonde must now take its place as merely one fact among many others. It has ceased to concern me.

She glances this way, surreptitiously. Then she starts her fooleries over again. Bends her head and shakes her curls. I suppose she's trying to infuriate me.

I'm forgetting where I am.

This will end badly.

We'd better just tick over. This Parisian dinner-party, which hasn't even begun, already belongs to the past. Part of the rubbish heap of history.

The guests were reading the little menu cards out to each other. The glass sparkled. A maid bustled round, completing the number of chairs. A petal from the azalea which filled the centre of the table fell noiselessly.

As he sat down on the left of Madame (Twelve Votes!) Chayriguès, Michel, who had just stealthily swallowed a pill, winked at the traitor Muller, who was already seated between Mlle Girardot and Mme Loewenstein, and had placed his long slender hands firmly on the tablecloth. Muller half smiled. Michel replied with a grimace.

"In the age of radar I should never have thought a scientist would have a leaning towards optical telegraphy," murmured Mme Chayriguès without turning to him. She was busy pouring some white powder into a glass of water.

He was disconcerted. All he could think of was to glare at her. The work of plastering to which she had subjected the puffy

flesh of her cheeks was indeed worth examination. She should have entered for the prize for the best French artisan.

"I once had occasion to tell that delightful Sacha Guitry that he should beware of signs," she went on imperturbably.

She had asked for it ! Bitches produce cads : it was a law of the human jungle.

"I'm sure you will excuse an intellectual from the provinces," he whispered, "but who is this Sacha Guitry I hear so much about when I come up to town?"

The true and false eyelashes of Mme Chayriguès, who had not foreseen the attack, batted violently.

"Aren't you being rather heavy-handed?" she whispered, calmly however.

She stirred the contents of her glass and began to drink them.

A point to me, Michel decided, and let himself slide into the mist.

The conversation turned on that afternoon's debate at the *Chambre*.

"I don't think it's one that history will remember," M. de Rétrémont had begun : since not very long he had been thinking of going into Parliament, but had not yet decided what shade of politics was his; and he smiled when his remark drew the reply: "Wait till you have joined us," from Dr Perreyve, that old Radical-Socialist, with whom he went shooting in the Sologne.

Perreyve and Guerroy found themselves in disagreement over the speech made by the Minister of Education. Guerroy, who belonged to the M.R.P., was irritated by the phrase 'Gentlemen, you are too greedy', with which the Minister had rebuked his group. Was the burning question of the free schools about to take the floor as usual? In the presence of an observant American woman this would be a tiresome way of saluting the excellence of these fillets of sole, soaked in Madeira after having been soaked in the ocean. Dr. Laffon asked urbanely if anyone had any news of events in the Argentine, that splendid country in which he had spent two whole weeks on a mission.

Michel was not listening. His mind had flown away to that noble plateau loaded with the monuments of science, where young captains carried on the only real battle : that of Humanity—or rather of its leaders—against the hidden forces of matter, to

conquer and enslave them. Although the pile was not working, the glory of *A*'s nave sang in the morning. The chimney rose like an oriflamme. One could hear a joyous throbbing from the blow-pipes which were preparing, at *B* and *C*, model plants in which the atom nuclei could perform their fission in a harmonious delirium. Along the white corridors, along the avenues, enthusiastic engineers and their cars passed one another without stopping . . .

The King of Thule's cup—old Goethe who loved science must admit that that was nothing. At Damezan other marvels would be seen! Martineau, dressed in white like some modern Druid, busy watching behind his ramparts the first vat of plutonium. When the old men of Troy caught sight of Helen, did they . . .?

He realized he was giving a start: a hand was touching his shoulder. A voice said:

"*Cher monsieur*, a call from your secretary. Paris has been asking you a question—for the last five minutes."

Everyone—Members of Parliament, the geneticist, Miss Williamsea, the old ladies—was laughing . . .

"Michel, my dear . . ." cried Juliette, who was sitting at the end of the table.

He looked at her and enjoyed the pleasure of making her lower her eyes.

He picked one of the azalea flowers, and this brought silence again. He asked:

"What is it?"

"Your charming father-in-law," explained Mme Chayriguès, ostentatiously seizing the flower which had fallen on the cloth, "got you a card for the debate in the *Chambre*. Were you able to be there? These gentlemen would like to know what you think, on the technical plane, of their methods."

Michel nearly retorted: 'Aren't these gentlemen of age to consult me themselves?' but he restrained himself. He remembered that between the Rue Raynouard and Saclay he had spent two hours at the Palais Bourbon: as a show, it had certainly been something! While various personalities recited speeches, others came in, went out, read newspapers, wrote letters, under the placidly mocking eye of a regiment of superb pot-bellied attendants. Exactly the opposite of the atomic pile: energy seeping

outwards through a thousand fissures. He knew some parliamentarians of high value, with whom it was a joy to converse, but—frankly—what a strange setting!

He hesitated for an instant only. He decided to let them have it. His father-in-law's three colleagues had not exactly inspired respect at first sight.

"*Messieurs*," he began, "every profession perfects its own methods and can ignore the judgment of outsiders. That's what I expect to do myself, so I shall refrain from making the slightest criticism. I shan't even say that the procedure of the whirlwind seems to me a poor means of analysis."

He smiled, with a faint benevolence.

"I will, though, if I may, remark on one tiny detail. Simply to show you, *mon cher papa*, that you gave me an exaggerated picture of the influence of Mme Deflize."

One could have heard a pin drop. Mme Deflize was one of the great rivals of Mme Chayriguès in the lobbies. The four Members leaned forward, looking at the speaker. Dr Laffon had given his daughter a distressed glance.

"Yes," continued Michel, imperturbably, "Madame Deflize sat enthroned in her place. I had got someone to point out to me Monsieur Petit-Rolland and his group—all the ones you had mentioned to me—and I was watching my men as one watches an experiment in the laboratory. I can assure you that, before and during the votes, they never once raised their eyes to look in her direction."

The silence of consternation that follows a *faux pas* weighed on the assembly. Dr Perreyve poured himself a glass of water, and the tinkling betrayed that his hand was trembling. Dr Laffon ('Ah,' he was thinking, 'how right they were in 1940 to coin the slogan "It was the men who were too clever who were our ruin"') gazed at Mme Chayriguès apprehensively; but that managing woman, who had had to submit to much harder knocks in the past and was beginning to be interested in her savage neighbour, burst into a roar of goodhumoured laughter. Everyone then relaxed.

"That proves," she said, "first, that those votes were quite unimportant; and secondly, that scientists are ex-tra-ord-inary people. The Paris salons concentrate too much on men of letters. Let's have more scientists—these new people whom nothing

escapes. Take the Prince de Broglie, for instance—with that huge head of his like an escaped inhabitant of Saturn. You'd think he was in the clouds; and yet, in a second, he has taken to pieces the colour of your dress and the timbre of your voice."

Two points to me, but she's not as stupid as I thought, Michel told himself, and he deigned to laugh. He began to speak again, calmly. As a man from the A.E.C., he must stress that Parliament didn't do its work so badly. It's members were not content to applaud the speeches that had just been made before them by Louis Armand and Francis Perrin, they voted the whole of the credits asked for by the Authority. Just one criticism: the loss of time. Why insist on the right to examine and pass the accounts, since, on the scientific plane, members both of the *Chambre* and of the Senate admitted they could accord their confidence?

The politicians looked questioningly at each other and at Mme Chayriguès.

"You're young in the ways of the world," Dr Perreyve interjected. "Don't ask for the impossible. We were appointed to sift the budget, you must remember that! You're claiming for your Authority a privilege that would make it a State within a State."

"You exaggerate. It would merely legalize a situation that exists. Or strengthen it. The men who are fighting to extract from matter its secrets and submit it to their intelligence feel humiliated when they realize that, for instance, Poujadists—the gentlemen of the farm butter and the kilo of plums—are arrogating to themselves rights over them. In their own field the scientists and technicians can run themselves."

Dr Guerroy quietly said a few unpleasant things about the part played by Poujade, which was discrediting Parliament. Mme Chayriguès asked Muller for his views. But before he could reply, the clear voice of André rose above the others.

"I'm sorry I can't agree with your point of view," he snapped at Michel. "You're a high-powered chap, no doubt, but a dangerous man."

It was said with a smile, but its sincerity was none the less felt by everyone. The adjective 'dangerous' had been uttered slowly.

With a slight gesture Mme Chayriguès excused herself to Muller and, in a flash, raised her lorgnette towards André. All things considered, she was not sorry she had got out of going to

the Italian Embassy. This man Thomas-Laborde, the young geneticist whose name was beginning to appear in the newspapers and in the conversation of intellectuals (didn't he have his photograph in *Paris-Match* in connection with an extremely boring article about ducks?), was showing a rather unusual warmth of conviction. A match for Christiane? A man who was nice to women, clearly—but not too fast! Youth likes to meet with some resistance, after its fashion; the child still needs to live and learn . . . Make Renoir divorce his wife and marry her? . . . Poor Christiane! I shan't impose that ordeal on you. You drive my car too well . . .

"I was expecting that attack," declared Michel, thrusting out his chest like a fine, as yet unbeaten athlete.

"A geneticist can't always be in agreement with a fanatic for nuclear energy," explained Dr Laffon, anxious to limit the difference of opinion (one alarm like the recent one was enough per meal). "They're two different disciplines."

His son-in-law stared at him aggressively.

"It's not a question of disciplines. André and I represent two opposing temperaments. Do you agree, André?"

"Certainly."

Michel's ferreting eyes stared at Juliette. She had broken off her private conversation with the American woman and the educational psychologist and was gazing into space. Her ears had grown pink—a sign of emotion she had been unable to cure herself of since childhood—and her delicate nostrils were breathing in and out too quickly.

To think—once again—that he had married that lovely superficial creature who couldn't conceal her feelings.

3

"I SHOULD LIKE . . ."

The sentence remained in suspense. André's eyes had just fallen upon the pink, delicately veined flowers of the azalea, which stood in the centre of the table like some tree of Beauty and the Charm of Life. I propose to make a clean sweep there too, he thought

. . . A complicated series of dishes was being served. Dark reds and straw-yellows sang in the brittle glasses.

"It comes to this," he resumed; "the existence of all of us is in danger. Honestly, the problems of nuclear energy cannot be left to specialists: we all should have a say. Either personally or, according to democratic procedure, through our representatives. And I declare there is not a day to be lost."

Michel, annoyed by the pontifical tone, wanted to shout: 'Applause from right and centre!' He contented himself with ostentatiously pouring out half a glass of water and swallowing a pill . . . Next to him, Mme Chayriguès, without turning her head, had refused the chicken with a rapid gesture of her left hand, which gave the other four ladies to understand that they could not take a second helping. She opened her bag and lit a cigarette. A deep silence fell. Even Dr Guerroy, a noted gourmet, refused the dish, after an agonized glance at the stuffing.

"I've just got back from Sweden. My chief had been notified that some public exercises in protection against atomic bombs were to take place there—the first ones in Europe. Since he was not free himself, he asked me to go . . . Stockholm, then. About a thousand people, civilians like you and me, have consented to be mobilized. When the siren goes, announcing that the approach of enemy bombers has been detected, they are to rush into an underground shelter of the latest kind, designed to protect its occupants not only from fire and blast, but also from radioactivity. They will have, for this rush, one minute ten seconds . . ."

The activity of the servants with their load of dishes slowed down. They were listening. They remembered the air-raid sirens of the days of the Occupation.

"At ten in the morning the siren sounded. What a stampede followed! And yet . . . You know the Swedes; they're people accustomed to moving steadily. And—above all—it was only a mock war, coming when everyone was prepared . . . I'm justified—am I not?—in calling it a mock war—in comparison. From the first second, the doors of the shelter, colossal twenty-five-ton masses, had begun slowly, inexorably to close. The children, the young people, the . . . young adults, arrived in time and got through; but as I speak I can still see that poor elderly couple who seemed made for an old print—elderly Stockholmers, so

rather on the tall side!—who had volunteered for the experiment and were now helping one another to run . . . To try to run! They were doomed in advance. They and others . . . Even in these optimum conditions, which the realities of war will never play at reproducing, even remotely, the experts recorded a wastage of ten per cent . . . You will see the double implication of that figure. When they organized the exercises the Swedish authorities intended to sound the alarm but not to alarm anyone. The Apocalypse has been asked to accept a specification: damned, ten per cent; elect, ninety per cent. For a normal mind, applying the simple rules of common sense, is led to the conclusion that, in not so good conditions, apart from the technicians on duty in the shelter . . .” ‘

His raised his left hand and let it fall with a gesture of resignation.

The long speech left its hearers spellbound. First and foremost the Members of Parliament and the city councillor. Rabaud had stealthily jotted down a note.

André leaned forward and looked at Juliette in search of her approval. Juliette was aware that Michel had noticed the manoeuvre. She refused to worry unduly about this. Just because one did not deny Michel's extreme intelligence nor his cleverness in ensnaring you in his dialectic, one was not obliged to deny the emotive power of André's words. Not today, any more than in the past. She was a woman. Quite apart from the old people of Stockholm, she had the right to think of her children, those little people with their right to a limitless devotion.

Mme Chayriguès' cigarette had gone out. She lit another . . . She did not like thinking of old age: it had, of course, a footing in her, but the beauty experts were limiting its obtrusiveness. Nor of death: it was approaching, but she was not afraid of it (she might even forestall it). And now, all of a sudden, in front of a sumptuous bush of flowers and in the presence of four of those Members of Parliament whose pettinesses and merits she knew as intimately as if they had been her own children, a milksop whom she ought to be despising had forced her to think of these things. She felt chilled to the bone, as though she had been forced to walk barefooted through the snow for an hour. The snow of the fields

of Sweden. With her worn-out legs she would never manage to reach in time the doors that do not reopen.

"A somewhat depressing business," she said in a voice that luckily, remained calm. "Nehru, in a talk I had with him one day, imagined scenes of the same kind."

The Members of Parliament nodded. Michel made a wry face.

"Is it in order for me to reply?"

"Certainly," said Mme Chayriguès. "The debate is now wide open."

"You have caught the Speaker's and your father-in-law's eye," said Dr Laffon.

In spite of himself, while that simpleton André had been spouting his speech and using the *tremolo* about those doors in Sweden, which certainly hadn't the majesty of their French sisters in the plutonium plant, Michel had recalled a certain night not long ago. He saw again the message lying on the table in the hall. Outside, under the sharp stars battered by the mistral, lay the wide, precise, sinuous landscapes of the Midi. In the end, it was true, the accident had been merely one of the classic kind, which could be immediately mastered in spite of its gravity (the delay which it brought about was another chapter, irrelevant here), but none the less he had at first been uncertain. And the memory left a bitter taste . . .

And suppose, he now wondered, that someone had informed this man, Thomas-Laborde? What was André doing at this dinner-party? Why was he meddling in atomic questions? Many hypotheses were possible. Perhaps the geneticists were maintaining informers in the Damezan security teams. Similar spying systems had always functioned within complex organizations.

I'll get this clear, he promised himself.

For the moment his job was to reply.

"I find orators of the tear-jerking type embarrassing," he said. "I expect people who play the philanthropist to know what they're up to. The poor elderly people immolated in advance are the cream-puff which our national sentimentality can't resist. Suppose you were to think occasionally of the future of the young people? Suppose——"

"Precisely," the other broke in, "with mutations——"

"You can talk when I've finished. Let me remind you that, in

the field of nuclear energy, France decided from the beginning to include only peaceful uses of it in her programme." He paused and lowered his eyes. Although I know nothing official, he told himself, I imagine France will have to decide, some day, to manufacture a bomb, perhaps several. Would that mean that we had become more aggressive? Certainly not. The real question lies elsewhere . . . Only it's too soon to start discussing that.

With a rapid movement André had stubbed out a lit match against the base of a bottle. He leant back in his chair :

"I'm not in any way criticizing the *official* policy."

He had stressed the adjective.

How little he hesitates! thought Michel Renoir. After the publication of the report on Windscale, he must have started asking questions, and one of the technicians at the Centre must have talked to him. Mixing true and false. There's certain information I defy anybody to be in possession of apart from Aubier, Launay, Boussois and myself, all of whom are beyond suspicion.

André was looking at Juliette.

"I've no authority," he said vigorously, "to cast doubt on French intentions. But in the first place, in the international discussions, our representatives, with the exception of Jules Moch, have hardly lifted a finger in protest against the stock-piling of bombs by certain powers. Secondly, it would be naïve to think, or let it be thought, that the peaceful applications of nuclear energy are free from danger. The more I consider the problem, the more I'm convinced that it's impossible to leave all atomic questions to the initiated. Peaceful applications indeed! We might as well say at once that crime, road accidents, the white slave traffic and the drug traffic are also peaceful applications of men's leisure."

Dr Laffon saw his son-in-law clench his fists and put his head down as though about to spring. This clash must be stopped. Up to this point it had been perfect. Chayriguès, Guerroy and Perreyve would not be sorry they had taken the trouble to come. He took a knife and tapped one of his glasses with it. In the midst of the talk about bombs the tiny, clear tinkle was absurd. But it was audible, all the same.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I propose a truce for the cheese. We are about to taste a wine to which one of my colleagues (perhaps you've guessed his name) has introduced me, and if we are to

appreciate it we need to be calm. I propose a toast to all the ladies, and to all the various disciplines present at this table. It seems to me that in Burgundy—without wishing to annoy my son-in-law—the wine-growers have long known and been using solar energy.”

Michel laughed bitterly. These French public men were incorrigible. A quarter of an hour's serious discussion—they couldn't take more! And these people would like to meddle in the great problems.

“I agree with *Monsieur le Député*,” said André, gazing at Juliette with candid eyes. “There are two or three points I should have liked to stress, but I've already bored these ladies too long.”

“That's it, we're only butterflies,” Mme Chayriguès protested. “Ask these gentlemen's wives. Or ask my niece, who never managed to pass the first part of her *baccalauréat* and is mad on tennis.”

“I must say,” said Mlle Girardot, unperturbed by the laughter, “I think a man who speaks from the heart, and simply, is always bound to be interesting.”

She turned her serious doll's face in the direction of André. They picked up their glasses of Burgundy and drank to each other like children who feel a mutual curiosity.

To his shame, Michel experienced a wave of jealousy. I oughtn't to have sent that letter to Françoise, he told himself again. If I remain alone I shall never carry out my task. I'm certainly not made of the same stuff as Martineau. Mme Chayriguès appealed to the Members of Parliament: “My driver has just explained to you in a nice way, *chers amis*, why our debates are so often boring. Try to profit by the lesson when you are speaking.”

They nodded sagely. They were not men. The real men lived at Damezan, at Oak Ridge, at Harwell, absorbed in their exhausting struggles for the good of all.

The ghastly woman leaned forwards towards her niece, whose fine wide dark eyes, the eyes of a healthy half-wit, at once became attentive.

“You mustn't generalize. I assure you it depends on who it is.” She observed a pause, and added: “As regards Monsieur Thomas-Laborde, I shan't contradict you.”

"One in the eye for me!" muttered Michel under his breath.

He had felt it coming. His Sacha Guitry and his Madame Deflize had not been forgotten. At the first good chance they were being avenged. The poor fool: it needed no sensitive feelers, no feed-back circuit, to be aware that the rivalry between him and André went deep.

In her Russian—or was it Auvergnat?—accent with its rolled 'r's' and sing-song vowels, Mme Loewenstein was congratulating her neighbour in short, outworn phrases. A man who has a heart makes himself understood by the other sex at once. Like with music, if a piece you don't know touches you, you know it's beautiful.

And André was drinking it in! He gave Juliette a stealthy glance and she returned it.

Michel contemplated Mme Loewenstein with eyes of hatred. It was said that in 1944 she had still been a beautiful woman. The fine remains had fallen apart. The fire of the solitaire, which she must have got out specially for this dinner-party, sparkled on her left hand—in vain, for it restored no life to the grey, freckled, peeling skin. To think that men had brought themselves to kiss that mauve-fondant hair. And to put their arms round that neck, now wrinkled like a dried-up puddle . . . Old age, that fission product of the force of a human being, deserved no privilege: it too ought to be buried under the ground. Like radioactive waste, for that was what it was. In case of an alarm before an atomic bombing, Mme Loewenstein would *ipso facto* form part of the wastage, to use Thomas-Laborde's phrase; but this would be no loss to humanity.

Dr Laffon, reassured, winked at his friend Guerroy:

"We'll begin the working session again after the coffee."

Juliette had heard.

"Since the discussion interests everyone—"

She had hesitated over the word 'discussion'. Michel understood that it meant, first and foremost, 'all that André has to say'.

"—why stop it so soon?"

With seeming casualness her level voice added:

"Besides, someone said he had not finished explaining his point of view."

"And that someone is you," murmured Mlle Girardot, with a long look at André.

"Well, monsieur . . ." Mme Chayriguès insisted.

Poor Dr Laffon looked reproachfully at his daughter, who pretended not to see.

The educational psychologist had pushed his plate away, folded his arms on the table and was watching the scene attentively.

"I'll tell you later why I must keep silence," said André softly to his neighbour. She thanked him in a whisper. Their hands touched.

Michel had emptied each of his glasses at a gulp. With his fists clenched and his head between his shoulders, he was watching for the reaction of his adversary opposite. He had decided to wipe the floor with him. Even if it cost a scandal.

Mme Chayriguès sat up straighter, to egg André on. For her part, she announced, she found the situation very amusing. The geneticist tried to get round the difficulty :

"And you, monsieur? You have all the necessary competence. Why not join in?"

Muller, consulted thus politely by André, glanced at Michel, who turned away. The man from Saclay scented danger. He replied prudently that two tenors on one stage were enough.

"You see, you can't escape," said Mme Chayriguès triumphantly.

In alarm, and at a loss what to do, Dr Laffon signed to the servants to hand the cheese round again. (Guerroy was the only one who had thought of complimenting him on the wine.)

André had absent-mindedly pulled out a packet of cigarettes. He began to fiddle with it.

"It seems to me I should be discourteous not to give in."

But some instinct made him glance at Michel, and he felt himself go pale. Sweat came out on his temples and at the roots of his hair, and a taste of blood rose in his throat. For it was the desire to kill, that he read, all of a sudden, on that impassive face, as clean as a blade.

"Later, though. Not now," he said in a strangled voice.

"Don't let me stop you," said Michel ironically.

André wiped his lips with his handkerchief.

"Are you not feeling well?" murmured Mlle Girardot.

"An old trouble . . . Don't worry about me."

Juliette, with wide eyes, was looking at the couple.

He's farked it, he's a poor fish, Mme Chayriguès decided. It's the other one who's interesting. How am I to make Christiane understand?

The arrival of tall creamy ice-puddings relaxed the atmosphere.

"Your Burgundy is perfect," said M. de Rétrément sentimentously. He went on, in the same breath: "Have you heard the latest joke of Jean Rigaud's?"

"A gentleman never heard a story," said Mme Chayriguès *sotto voce*, in English.

The city corncillor, who had not heard what she said, smiled at her. After stroking the back of his head as though to push the idea out, he began his story.

Michel continued to follow his own thoughts. He did not allow himself to rejoice. The battle wasn't over: André, who had run away like a schoolgirl, would try to regain his ground. He closed his eyes and wafted himself to the plateau of Damezan. A's fan was making the peaceful night quiver. Like the moaning of an animal as the pangs go deeper and deeper into its body, the perpetual birth of the savage brood of the successors continued . . . But that was to anticipate. For the moment the pile was in a state of lethargy. Not one gramme of plutonium was coming to birth on the soil of France.

4

MICHEL WAS STOPPED BY HIS FATHER-IN-LAW AS HE ENTERED the drawing-room:

"Feeling out of sorts, old man?"

"I'm all right. Even the company of idiots is instructive."

Dr Laffon was accustomed to say of his son-in-law, with an admiring click of the tongue, 'He's quite someone', but by Jove! this evening an average man would have been decidedly more manageable.

"I think you ought—not to pay court to Madame Chayriguès,

for I know you don't like bowing and scraping—but to talk to her, put her in the picture. She's not an idiot by any means. I assure you she serves this country well. And if there's really no way of stopping you from wallowing in the nuclear energy business—"

"I must interrupt—"

He was about to ask his father-in-law, point blank, whether a certain Dr Laffon was one of the famous twelve, when he himself was interrupted : Mme Chayriguès in person had laid her hand on his arm.

"Here's the man I need ! My dear Laffon, I'm going to rob you of your son-in-law."

"Provided you restore him to my daughter . . ."

"Of course . . . Dear Monsieur Renoir, if you're not frightened of an old lady, come with me into this quiet corner."

They sat down behind the piano, on an old settee. In passing, Michel had observed groups forming, like molecules in a test tube: André foregathering with the Parliamentarians, Muller with Mlle Girardot and Juliette, the city councillor with Miss Williamsea and the wives, and the old friends of Charlotte with the educational psychologist. He would have liked to hear the humanitarian idiocies which André had already begun to spout. As soon as he had finished with this caricature . . .

"It may surprise you, *cher monsieur*, but you interest me a great deal."

He frowned and looked her up and down.

"All these people are nice," she went on, "they all have qualities, but one must face it, they're all weak. Even Rabaud. There's a man with the seeds of a prime minister in him but who, for reasons which I can't tell you, will never be called upon . . . You are a strong man. I admire strong men. I try to help them, because all strength is exposed to incomprehension and solitude. Yes, it is. I appreciated your victory just now, but it's no good denying that it took something out of you . . . One must—yes, one must—help the strong."

Michel saw Guerroy and Parreyve fling up their arms, while Rabaud glanced in his direction. Meanwhile André was shaking his head gravely and beginning to speak again. He had the absurd expression of the person in the know, who is keeping the best for the last.

"Well, *mon cher* Renoir, have you nothing to say to me?"

He gazed at Mme Chayriguès insolently. Was that scarecrow daring to call him '*cher* Renoir'? A woman whose existence was unknown to him two hours earlier! He was no Member of Parliament, he needed no one!

She repeated her last sentence more gently, and without using his name. She narrowed her eyes. He must understand that she was aware she had been too bold.

"Since you're anxious to spare my strength, I think, Madame, it's as well I shouldn't waste words. Women have no business with certain problems. To my mind, the way in which they are extending their influence is a sad sign of the times. The Parisians are no longer men. Apart from their car and strip-tease and the month's salary, one wonders what goes on in their heads."

He made to rise.

"One moment—"

She was trying in vain to remember if she had ever met a ruder man. She could think of only two as rude: Marcel Aymé who, while she was congratulating him on the funniness of one of his plays, yawned in her face and kept a gloomy silence, and a Dominican, to whom she had introduced herself as a penitent and who had thrown her out (she had, it was true, wanted to interview him for a magazine).

"We've nothing more to say to each other," he protested. "That is supposing I ever had anything to tell you."

With a skill that took him by surprise, she captured one of his hands in hers:

"I'm sorry. I have still to say to you that you seem to me disconcertingly impertinent. And that, really, I rather like it."

For the first time a smile lit up Michel's features: "A good example of the masochism of women!"

"So you think you know? Don't use long words like an illiterate. Let's suppose what I want is to learn, and learn, and go on learning. When you're excited because some big discovery seems near, would you say you are a masochist?"

He smiled again.

"Perhaps you're right." He looked at her hard. For the first time he seemed to be seeing her. He had taken away his hand but

drawn nearer. The woman had a slight resemblance to Françoise.

"What do you expect of me?" he asked dryly.

"To answer my questions. I've already told you I would like to help you."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"What makes you think I need helping? It's intolerable."

"Listen, *cher ami* . . ."

The word sounded odd, but he let it pass. Not long ago he had been as offhand with Françoise. She considered that she was making headway.

"... pride is not, to my mind, a defect in a man, provided that it doesn't make him lose his sense of proportion. Can you give me any instance of a human being who's self-sufficient? Who has no need of company, of affection, of a little backing or a little backing-up, of—I don't know, some helping hand or other in his life?"

"Perhaps I could," he stalled.

She shook her head.

"You don't mean it. I can guess, from the lie, that you aren't a happy man."

He laughed venomously.

"As for you, you get on one's nerves. But . . ."

He looked down at the carpet with a strange expression. Apart from Aubier, Launay and Martineau, he was wondering who would have dared to take up his time in this way.

"... but, as I am certainly not the first to have complained of that, . . . what does 'happy' mean? A man's life is all one piece. The difficulties—and we all have them, that's certain—help to make the harmony of the whole. Plutonium—but I was forgetting, you don't know about plutonium. In any case—"

She broke in :

"In any case, the picture you draw is idealized. In actual fact, and it seems, alas ! inevitable, the worm is there, inside."

"Be quiet," he ordered her. "You're just making mischief. I adore my profession—that's it, I adore it—"

He gave a brief glance in the direction of Juliette.

"—as I have never loved a woman, and perhaps never shall. Ah ! you've asked for frankness : well, I will give it to you—too bad if you don't like it. It's such a wonderful adventure, to live in

the front line of science, in danger, in secrecy, and also in friendship with a few men—a friendship that blows no trumpet but proves itself again and again . . . There are setbacks, terrible setbacks, I assure you. But try to understand this, though you are a woman : the pioneers of atomic research may make mistakes, but they never have the right to let themselves be beaten. Matter knows nothing of pity. The researcher or technician who loses courage is lost. Or rather—and you can make fun of my enthusiasm if you like, for the scorn of outsiders means nothing to me—it's as if matter respects those whom it has wounded and who return to the battle. *We*, madame, are fashioning the future, its men and its wealth. We aren't going round and round in a circle, word-spinning."

"If, all the same, this evening . . ." she whispered. A sort of tenderness came over her old face. Was she going to cry?

"Thank you for what you have told me," she resumed. "You are of the right stamp and I will do something for you, on the word of Renée Chayriguès. Listen—"

And on the spot in that drawing-room corner she invited him to lunch or dine with her at his choice. A man like him was ripe for the highest posts. A minster's private secretary, to begin with. Let him ring her up tomorrow. She would have a word with various ministers. Her niece would be there . . .

Surprise prevented Michel from reacting at first. Suddenly he assumed his full height :

"What's that you were saying?"

"I was speaking," she said, "of my niece. She's a charming young thing. She hasn't exactly the intelligence of Henri Poincaré. But the *chansonniers* would explain to you also that her bosom is less flat than a philosopher's. In conversation she's not without verve when she gets going . . ."

He stamped on the floor.

"You're on the wrong track, madame. I shall always refuse to let you waste your time on my affairs."

She changed colour. Her heavy lips trembled.

"Very well," she said disdainfully. "You will realize when it is too late that you were wrong. You know the expression, 'who is not with me'—"

"—'is against me'. An excellent motto."

"I agree with you, for it is mine."

"Thanks for the warning . . . I, madame, haven't had the leisure yet to find myself a resounding motto, but when I get old I will see to that. There must be words to flout fear."

"The swine!" she muttered, not loud enough for him to hear. And then, aloud :

"Hurry up, all the same, for I have the impression that you haven't long to live."

He gave an exaggerated bow, while she lit a cigarette.

On the liqueurs tray there was a carafe of water. He set off towards it, smiling.

That silly old woman who thought she could frighten him . . . The poor insect! To an atomic scientist engaged in the Adventure, one more battle or one less was of no account. A man who had passed through certain ordeals of waiting and disappointment was vaccinated against all fear.

He poured himself out some water into a large brandy glass . . . He observed ironically the antics of his father-in-law, who was urbanely moving into the region of the piano. He could almost hear the conversation : 'Well, do you find Michel interesting?' 'Fifty per cent Jean-Louis Barrault, fifty per cent choirboy. Remarkable in his own sphere, I'm sure . . .' She wouldn't go further, for that old bag of malice would conceal her game.

It remained to demolish Andre. His time would come . . .

But how disagreeable this overchlorinated water was! He put the glass down. The psychologist was breaking loose from the old ladies. Muller, with a cigar between his fingers, was talking to the lovely Girardot with animation. Juliette, while pretending to listen, was thinking of something else . . .

The room wavered before Michel's eyes, his ears were buzzing and his legs felt weak. It was lucky he had not kept the glass in his hand, for he would have dropped it. His heart was throbbing madly.

And those two pills I took, he thought roughly, what use are they?

He wiped his forehead with his hand. His legs were trembling, but were already recovering strength. The room was regaining its

balance. Like a runner getting his pace, the heart slowly calmed down.

'For I have the impression you haven't long to live.' It was as if facts had wished to give the witch's threat an immediate proof. A bit of oriental magic. A powder dissolved in the water. That taste of chlorine . . .

Absurd.

As absurd as the vision of Dr Laffon chatting on the old settee with his *chère amie*. That *chère amie* who wanted to shove her niece into his son-in-law's bed . . .

Not all fear was absurd. The long neck of the carafe had just transformed itself into the silhouette of A's chimney on the plateau of Damezan. The poor pile, out of action day and night for more than a week. It and the whole of the French nuclear energy programme. The best technicians—those of whom he had said that they were fashioning the future—incapable of emerging from the present.

He walked towards the door.

Juliette had caught up with him.

"You can't be going?"

She said it almost without opening her lips. If there was a quarrel it was no use attracting people's attention.

"Can't one even use the telephone now? Put me on a lead while you're about it."

"The things you say!"

But she breathed more easily.

"Your telephone call can wait. Papa's friends are in a hurry too. Do be nice, they came here for your sake."

"When your dear friend, the geneticist, has finished explaining nuclear problems to them, these gentlemen can call on him to chant the goodbye hymn."

"What a man! Come along now . . ."

Guerroy and Perreyve greeted his arrival with cries and with enthusiastic remarks that made him see that he had been wrong. The origin of the dinner-party really had been the desire of Laffon's colleagues to meet him, Michel. Information obtained in a closed circle, in a friend's house—is it not more precise and reliable than any that is divulged in official places?

"And now we're all the more anxious to hear what you have to say," said Guerroy, a tall man with a sharp chin and large dark eyes, "since Monsieur—" and he pointed at André "—who is your colleague and who possesses, let us admit, a real persuasive talent (Members of Parliament are said to have no heart, we must give the lie to that stupid rumour)—Monsieur has just painted for us a somewhat disquieting picture. Of course, I'm sure I speak for my colleagues present and future,"—a smile for M. de Rétrémont—"there could be no question of our country putting the clock back. By all means let us interest ourselves in nuclear energy like the United States, England and the U.S.S.R. But must we go so far and so fast? Is it necessary to burden our compatriots, in the name of an ideal that is scientifically open to dispute, with such a programme of construction, with all the financial sacrifices it demands?"

Laffon, Perreyve and de Rétrémont nodded approval. Rabaud had perhaps winced, but he said nothing . . . Michel covered his eyes with his right hand to conceal a smile. What Dame Chayriguès had said was true, all these people were weak. How naïve to imagine that he would unbutton before them! In nuclear questions the jockeys did not give 'good tips'.

If that little Helana Williamsca, on whom the educational psychologist was trying out his American, thought that French scientists were less discreet than others . . .

"Monsieur Thomas-Laborde is not a colleague," he said cheerfully. "But that's only a detail."

A dull sound drowned the end of the sentence. Juliette, who was standing behind his father's chair, had dropped an ash-tray.

André licked his lips and turned away. Mme Chayriguès, who was listening with Mlle Girardot and Jean Muller not far away, gave him an ironical glance, but the girl had very discreetly raised her hand in a friendly gesture.

"You will agree, messieurs," Michel resumed, "that it's impossible for me to say anything until I know what the orator on the other side has said."

"Too true," admitted Guerroy. "Would Monsieur Thomas-Laborde be very kind and sum up his position once more?"

André met the imploring eyes of Juliette.

"Isn't 'position' rather too strong a word?" he said in a low

voice. "I'm asserting nothing. I'm questioning the assertions of others. Stripping these assertions down. Putting the man in the street on his guard."

"That is to say, you don't know what you mean."

The Members of Parliament, the city councillor and Mme Chayriguès exchanged smiles. A protest from André was countered by a retort in which Michel applied to his adversary a phrase which had, in its time, been used to define Pétainism. This was a piece of malice which the geneticist's former opinions rendered even nastier.

André took the shock without flinching: "A duck-breeder is used to having his face rubbed in the mud," he remarked.

A few moments later he began, maintaining the calm and even voice of a researcher and humanist.

Michel, who had sat down between Guerroy and Rabaud, had adopted a haughty expression. In reality he was listening with close attention.

Was it opportune, André asked, to realize at vast cost the fission of atomic nuclei in enormous and complicated reactors when tomorrow perhaps England and America would have achieved the fusion of those same nuclei? The Harwell technicians had already obtained temperatures of five million degrees. Tomorrow, at one stroke, the monumental machines now celebrated as the last word in technical achievement, as the golden gates to the future of France, as the maternity-home of French economy, etcetera, might well become hopelessly out of date—as out of date as wheelbarrows, horse-buses and hand-presses.

A short flash shot through Michel's brain: "The eternal grouser's hobby-horse—the harp at the party—worthless!"

"I used the words 'at vast cost'," the other went on. "I repeat them . . . The industrial reactors will have rather a short period of usefulness, but that will not prevent their materials from remaining 'on the books' for long years to come, and great masses of concrete will have to be poured in. That's not all. Wherever fission is produced, fission products and radioactive waste, solid or liquid, automatically come into existence. Well, what's to be done with this progeny, which is as dangerous in its way as the most terrible bombs? The waters of the Rhône, for example, so

often quoted as the symbol for the proud forces of Nature, may, beginning next year, if all or part of the muck cooked up at Damezan is poured into them, have a composition and a level of radioactivity that would make them appallingly harmful. Through them a regular plague of Egypt might strike the Midi. An end of the pleasant beaver colonies and the clean free life of the fishes. An end of the Camargue! For, gentlemen, the Camargue is the waters of the Rhône, running and pumped by the sun over the back of ancient layers of mud already brought down by the river. You have just been rejoicing in a rice harvest there, which for the first time should meet the national demand: are you not afraid that that may be a Pyrrhic victory?"

Where does the little man get such stupid so-called information? Michel was wondering wearily. I did think he had more sense. In all levels of society people have at last realized that the existence of an atomic centre in a district involves no more dangers than that of any important industrial plant. But no: I, the geneticist, know better. But after all, Damezan has had geneticists constantly down, we've received from them all the necessary benedictions; this scatterbrain is merely making a tendentious case against us, basing it on false information.

"You have read in the papers," the orator continued, "a summary of the report by the British authorities on the events at Windscale. What can justify you in supposing that a similar catastrophe might not happen at Damezan tomorrow, or this very evening? Did not the French atomic scientists endorse in impressive language the professional competence of their British colleagues? And yet, so the report tells us—and I am being generous, I'm accepting it as it stands and not suspecting it of being toned down—there was a failure of the human element. A moment of inattention, of forgetfulness on the part of a technician, and radioactive dusts escape over the countryside like madmen not properly watched by their warders. For the details, I refer you to the report. The beautiful green of the English fields has had to be sifted, sieved and searched like a criminal's alibi."

Michel had let the ash from his cigarette drop on to his suit. He shook himself silently. He was thinking. He scowled more and more.

"The great plank in the defence of technological civilization,"

said the geneticist ironically, "used to be the perceptible prolonging of the average length of life in the so-called civilized countries. But no reasonable person would dare to claim that, by augmenting the number and complexity of the material means at his disposal, man in those countries has become happier, handsomer or more intelligent. Well, the zealots have upset the shape of the land. Did not the propagandists of the myth of productivity and of a super-industry saving the world—did not these men, to justify their frenzy, solemnly engage themselves to cause such an improved humanity to come into being? One more lying promise. Like the lying promise to protect matter at the very moment when they were allowing themselves to juggle with it unlimitedly. Shall we not see, one day not far ahead, the construction of a society for the protection of natural uranium? S.P.N.U.?"

"The Land of Promise," he went on, "turned out to be the Land of Hire Purchase." The technicians did not lack courage, there were heroes in their ranks, but 'nothing new under the sun'! Courage and heroism belonged to the oldest stock of virtues.

"One of my friends," added André, "had been condemned by the doctors. For five months on end his wife stayed by him, never leaving him, not eating, hardly sleeping at all. She saved him. Yes, she alone did it, and for a long time afterwards it was she—thin as a rake, weak, a wreck—who looked as if she had nearly died . . . In another couple I've seen the situation reversed . . . But the story, for all its beauty, is too sad for me to tell it . . . Where is this leading to? I like Aesop's Fables. I say that we have no need of a super-humanity, of new values. There is already more in us, in ordinary daily life, if we know how to find it there."

The emotional silence was broken by a laugh from Michel, who was pleased and found the new direction taken by the speech a more reassuring one.

"Bravo for the *Veillée des Chaumières*. You're getting the weepers on your side—that is to say, three-quarters of the people."

He looked at his wrist watch, then calmly placed his hands on his knees. Was he waiting to be served up with more phrases?

Nobody breathed a word. The politicians were looking at André, who lowered his eyes as though guilty.

"Even the Sibyl of Cumea deigned to be more explicit than you," said the voice of Mme Chayriguès abruptly.

As if the sentence was addressed to someone else, Michel did not trouble to turn.

"I'm speaking to you, Monsieur Renoir."

"Enchanted. Don't you wish to express your point of view? I give up my chair to you."

"Are you by any chance at a loss for an answer to a man who has a heart?"

"It's true, Michel," said Dr Laffon, with embarrassment, "You owe us a reply."

"To you, yes. But, forgive me for saying so, I'm not holding a press conference."

Mme Chayriguès laughed.

"Come, ladies . . . the great brains don't work in our presence."

With her she swept off Muller also, who did not dare resist.

Juliette noticed with pain an exchange of glances: this time it was not in her eyes that André had sought for consolation. Could she, in two years, have lost so much? And in this, André stood not only for André, he stood for Michel. The struggle would grow more bitter.

Michel still said nothing.

"Please go ahead, monsieur," said Guerroy.

The atom scientist looked searchingly at the Member of Parliament.

"Your insistence is flattering. It's part of the problem. By asking me to give explanations which really ought to be given by my chiefs, you put me in a difficult position. Don't worry, I've accepted it, all I need do is to report tomorrow the gist of what I shall say. Only there is still, in this group, one person too many."

The tall M. de Rétrémont sat up straight: "Monsieur! Representing as I do, in the Paris Municipal Council, the most—"

"I don't mean you!"

With a discreet gesture Michel indicated André. There was a fresh silence. Clearly painfully, the geneticist's nostrils could be seen to quiver.

"What? You extract a statement from me and then, when you

are going to reply, turn me out? Those are the ways of an inquisitor."

"Ho, ho! An inquisitor! I like the word! So not everything was perfect before the days of the atom scientist!" Michel jeered. And then, seriously: "It's for my chiefs to judge my actions. I stand for them here. It's for me alone to decide before whom I have the right to speak this evening."

"Come," protested Guerroy, "Monsieur Thomas-Laborde is an excellent patriot whose work does the country honour. Devil take it, this isn't a meeting of the Defence Committee! There's no Communist here!"

"Thanks, monsieur, you are teaching me that there are two kinds of secrecy: the vague and the serious. In the Authority we know only the second kind."

He addressed himself to André:

"To my own personal taste, you have already said much too much. And all you have done is to sum up what's in your files. I'm not going to play the fool, giving you information over whose later use I can have no control."

"The general moral conclusion of what this gentleman said didn't seem to me dangerous in any way," declared Perreyve, backed up immediately by Dr. Laffon.

The atom scientist was unyielding. "One doesn't play about," he said, "with problems as grave as this one."

At last André stood up. He was very pale and his teeth were clenched. He advanced towards Michel and looked straight into the eyes of this man who was no longer willing to be his friend and colleague.

"If you were in my position, rest assured you'd do the same," said Michel to the politicians in a slightly bantering tone.

They expected a final flare-up. It did not come. André shrugged his shoulders and, without anyone now trying to hold him back, went off to join the ladies.

With an indifferent expression Michel went over and sat in the chair he had left.

"Now we are among ourselves," he began, beckoning to his hearers to close the circle. "Did somebody say the man who has just left us was a patriot? Without due consideration. And, indeed, patriotism is no longer a valid guarantee when it wallows in

sentiment. It is as though we allowed that American girl to join us on the pretext that she has sex appeal. We must keep our clear-headedness. I might almost say our cynicism."

The others were listening, fascinated by such calm audacity. It was as if no one had spoken before Michel. Perreyve, the man from the Midi, had quite forgotten the danger of the proud waters of the Rhône and the fertile muds of the Camargue being poisoned by atomic waste-products.

"And now to work," said Michel. "It will take three-quarters of an hour—my lecture, your questions and my answers."

He could see the wall, with its load of swords and photographs, slowly parting to allow A's long chimney, supple like a black dancing girl, to enter the room and listen in silence.

Not a milligramme of plutonium was coming to birth at this moment on the sacred plateau, but by the virtue of Michel and his friends this sterility, of which the country was ignorant, would not be prolonged.

5

"VERY BRILLIANT, YOUR SON-IN-LAW, ROGER OLD MAN . . . Like Soustelle or Pierre Cot on one of their best days . . . It makes one happy to know that the country's future is entrusted to first-rate men."

Michel was conscious of having spoken well. The compliments did not interest him. He quickly shook the hands that were offered, then made for the door, the telephone, Martineau and new ideas.

Juliette intercepted him again :

"One moment. You must have two minutes' conversation with M. Léotard."

When Michel had registered the name, he said the man could go to hell. What could that Ostrogoth have to complain of? He'd had an excellent dinner, hadn't he?

"But your son's future . . ."

"I'm thinking of that, and need no help. I don't require advice from your man of straw, even if he is wearing a dinner-jacket."

Juliette had tears in her eyes. She was breathing very fast.

"What can have happened at Damezan? You're odious this evening. There's no other word for it. Madame Chayriguès has just left—I could feel she was furious—with her niece, André and the American girl."

"The Court Circular doesn't interest me in the least."

"Michel! . . . I've never seen you like this . . ."

"I can't help it, one doesn't bathe twice in the waters of the same river!"

The expression was new to her. She thought it meant that a man cannot always love the same woman. Her ears grew pink.

"And Muller?" he asked.

"So you're interested in someone? He went with the rest. I think they're all going to spend an hour in some bar."

"Not Muller."

"Because you know people's inmost hearts?"

"As well as your psychologist. I said 'Not Muller'. You will kindly get rid of Léotard and come home with me."

Between the Rue de Bucarest and the Rue Raynouard, husband and wife did not say a single word. Michel had allowed himself the impertinent pleasure of sitting in the back seat. He stretched out his legs and smoked like a passenger in a taxi. Juliette swallowed back her rage and drove as fast as possible.

The sad play-acting continued in the lift. They were packed so close that they touched, yet did not speak to one another.

In the hall, in accordance with instructions, a light had been left on. Louise, who slept in the drawing room on the evenings when her master and mistress were dining out, had left its door ajar. The warm and silent flat spoke of sleep.

"I shall sleep in my study," he snapped, as he took off his overcoat. "Come to me in five minutes. I have things to say to you."

With one hand against the wall she was taking off her shoes with a student's alacrity and putting on slippers. She turned.

"What's this now? You needn't expect me."

He looked her up and down mockingly.

"I said in five minutes."

She thought that if she did not hit him it was only because of that door ajar.

He heard the sliding of her slippers along the corridor like a distant sound at night in the country. She was obeying his order. She was late, but there was nothing in that to attenuate her defeat : she must have spent all that time titivating herself before coming.

A light knock.

"Yes . . . come in," he muttered.

The first thing he saw was her long white hands—she had taken off her rings. He meant that there should be no place in him except for anger, yet he felt moved. It was as though he had had a right to a different Juliette from the one the word-spinners knew.

"I wouldn't have come but for the children."

"No matter ! Sit down."

She sat down in one of the two armchairs facing the desk, behind which, after a hesitation, he took his seat.

'We look rather like a judge and an accused, but I don't mind if we do,' he thought. He laid his hands on the wide green blotting paper and looked at her in silence.

She dared not raise her eyes. That model of the pile on her husband's desk disturbed her like the silent presence of a third person. Her lovely small face with its regular features did not move. Under the blue and white check dressing-gown with its green sash (my last birthday present to her !), her gentle breathing scarcely betrayed itself.

She's become a silly creature, he thought, but how young she still is, physically ! If I set her free, she won't be long in finding a taker.

"You had things to say to me?"

She was allowing herself the initiative. He started.

"I expect an explanation from you. I had agreed, reluctantly, to a small dinner-party here for Pierrette's birthday. I am responsible to my work for every second of my time, I am not a clown that you exhibit. Why did you change the programme? I warn you, I shan't accept lying excuses."

"In other words," she said sharply, gazing hard at him in her turn, "only your time is valuable. That of Papa, of Monsieur Perreyve, Guerroy and Rabaud, of the Members of Parliament, is worth nothing at all."

He was secretly amused to note that she had not dared pronounce the name of Thomas-Laborde. Perhaps she was relying on him to do it. He would leave that to others!

"You're forgetting the dowager, Dame Chayriguès, who, prompted by you, has the audacity to try and get me away from the Authority."

He banged his fist on the desk. The model visibly shook.

"I warn you," he said, "that it will be the worse for you if you use evasions."

"But it's all right for you to use threats? You don't realize how nervy you're becoming. Damezan is doing you no good."

"I won't allow you to bring Damezan into this. I give you a minute. After that, I want a definite answer."

She was breathing very fast. Desire and pity began to rise in him.

"By the way," he added, "you don't choose your messengers very well. There was a moment when that witch was on the point of suggesting Christiane to me as a bedfellow."

Without realizing it, he was hardly joking at all when he said that. He was trying to establish a bridge between himself and the woman he was questioning so harshly.

For a moment astonishment stopped Juliette from thinking. Though she knew Michel's brutal frankness well, she convinced herself that this time he was lying. Suddenly she jumped up, and, with a cry, made for the door. She did not reach it. He too had jumped forward and had locked it.

"Swine! . . . swine!"

It was all she could find to say.

"You'd better sit down and listen to me, instead of howling like a fool."

She obeyed. She might have retorted—but what was the good, it was too late now—how she regretted having given her father a free hand . . . All of a sudden a great weariness descended over her forehead and her cheeks. She sat down, crossed her legs and, leaning her head against the back of the chair, closed her eyes. The girlish lace of her nightdress showed below her dressing-gown. The light played over the bare heel which emerged from the slipper.

He felt he could now strike.

"There comes a moment," he began, "when words that have

always been suppressed have to be said. One thought one was showing strength by being tactful; one was merely producing muddled situations. You used to be a straightforward girl. I invite you to give me a straightforward answer. Has André Thomas-Laborde been your lover?"

She uncrossed her legs and sat up slightly to pull her dressing-gown together at the bottom.

"I thought you knew."

"I thought I knew; that's not the same thing. I have come to realize I was still contenting myself with supposition . . . Did you love him?"

"Is that worth going over again?"

But already she was continuing :

"I yielded to a man who was most undeservedly unhappy. Perhaps I even led him on to make me yield. You remember the period of the Liberation. My political opinions ought to have separated me from André, but he was an old friend . . . Then you came . . ."

"—and I wrenched you away from him, because to me the two of you were a couple that went against all logic, all clear-cut values. Nothing should be based on pity. Through your fault a half-injustice was about to be followed by a complete injustice. The lively, beautiful, brilliant Juliette Laffon in the arms of that flabby man . . ."

He had called her beautiful and brilliant, and her eyelids fluttered with pleasure. She had some difficulty in saying, in measured tones, that André was not a flabby man.

"What !" he protested. "He got out of the way like a cad, and all he could think of then was to marry a woman older than himself, fail to have children by her, and go to the divorce courts. He has gruel in his veins, not blood."

"It's much more complicated than that, Michel."

"Really? Explain what you mean. From having to do with educational psychologists you can distinguish fine shades that escape me."

The irony in his voice wounded her. She had been going to speak, she did not . . . *She* knew all too well why André had decided on divorce, for at the moment of doing so he had talked to her on the telephone, in secret, for a whole hour. A flabby man?

A very upright one. He had obtained his wife also through pity: 'I hope I shall love you one day,' he had said to her on the very evening when he proposed to her, and the poor woman had burst out laughing, finding this declaration so different from the turgid phrases of love-literature. We shall have children, she had thought, and love will come . . . Neither the children nor love had come. Years later, sad and humiliated by fruitless medical treatment, she had sought refuge with her husband in vain, for to her all too human question: 'At least you love me?' he had replied with long precise sentences of which the upshot was that, in spite of his efforts, he still loved Juliette . . .

But Michel resumed:

"You have nothing to add, for he's a wet, in the full horror that that implies. Twice this evening I stuffed him into my pocket."

She sat up sharply.

"Don't go on to that. I've been through too much with your rudeness to our host and fellow-guests. It was out of regard for me and for father that André didn't give you the answer you deserved. He has spirit, and what you call weakness in him is merely his excellent upbringing."

"Yes, of course, my parents worked on the land, whereas in that gentleman's family—"

"That's enough, Michel!"⁴

He lowered his eyes. He had put himself in the wrong: never had either his father-in-law or his wife bothered about his origins.

"All right," he grumbled. "I'm getting off the track, but it's your fault . . . for I find it odd, my girl—" not without pleasure, he saw her grow pale at the vulgarity of the term "—that you should make pronouncements about upbringing, you who have the audacity to camouflage a lover's comeback as a desire to organize a scientific encounter of national importance!"

"Oh, Michel! Aren't you ashamed?"

No, he wasn't ashamed. As she buried her face in her hands, he shouted that he forbade her to weep.

There was a silence.

"So it was to insult me like this that you made me come," she murmured, uncovering her face.

She was not weeping, but her eyelashes were fluttering furiously and the lovely eyelids were all red, while the beginnings of

a blue and red ring showed beneath the eyes. In you, too, he thought, as he watched her, a flare-up of rods may happen. You're suffering : so much the better . . . Juliette's back was hunched. Her whole attitude expressed surrender and fear.

But suddenly she shook her head. She repressed a shudder and drove her elbows violently backwards. She had just thought of the children. They were not to blame. And without her what would become of them? This man would never find in himself enough tenderness to defend them.

"Come to the point and cut out the brutal details," she demanded in a clear voice. "Is it divorce you want?"

"I'll tell you later. You must justify yourself first. My conduct will depend on yours."

She did not reply. Her wild eyes, which shrank from encountering that odious incomprehensible model, glanced vaguely at the door and the walls, a blue-print and the card-index . . . But he stood up. She watched him come, with his hands in his pockets and, with an assumed nonchalance, sit down beside her on one of the arms of her chair. She huddled back in the chair and, as he murmured : "Do you still love him?" still kept silence.

He had stood up again and was pacing up and down.

"Yes, you were made for one another," he said, answering himself, "and I was wrong not to understand it. I wanted to raise you up to greatness. I didn't see the difference between the facile enthusiasm of your youth and the genuine appetite for knowledge. What's mediocre remains mediocre . . . Perhaps it's better so. Why not?"

Juliette was wondering whether she loved or detested the man who was saying these unexpected things in front of her. Hadn't he perhaps gone mad?

"Raise me to greatness?" she stammered. "You really wanted that? It's the first time you've said anything about it to me."

"Wasn't I there as an example? Your nature has gone the way it had to go."

He stopped his zigzag pacing. He was still hoping for an answer—perhaps for a word of love : even then, when he seemed most resolute to block every path for it, something in him was crying out for a reconciliation . . .

But Juliette had folded her arms over her knees, and two mocking furrows appeared at the corners of her mouth.

"No doubt you think I'm wandering," he resumed. "Well, without the great maniacs like me, I assure you the earth would be a far more barbarous place than what you see today."

He went back and sat down behind his desk.

"For various reasons, at least for the time being, I don't want a divorce. Tomorrow I am going back to Damezan. I shall take Michel with me. I assume control over everything that concerns him, I don't want you to have anything to do with it any more . . . You will simply see that his things are packed."

"But how——"

"Shut up. Anyhow, you must go now. I've work to do."

"At one in the morning?"

She was laying hold of this detail simply as a tactic. Michel was claiming to take her son away from her, but nothing was settled yet. If she was obliged to yield, it would only be for a few days: fathers who demand point-blank the right to bring up their children themselves have their heads in the clouds. Michel as much as the others . . . if not even more.

Meanwhile he had laughed, as if Juliette's exclamation seemed to him fabulously provincial, and he did not think of replying.

She stood up, while he, with the key in his hand, walked to the door. He opened it and immediately stood aside.

"I don't know if your divan has any sheets," she said in a low voice.

"Doesn't matter. You can go."

She moved slowly forward. All of a sudden she was fully conscious of the atmosphere of that large bare study, made for silent reflection. If it came to divorce, she would never be sorry she had married Michel. She felt proud to have had three children by him. In this room impregnated with intelligence she felt a kind of respect . . . Would he kiss her? Instinctively she drew near him. But he moved away. He knew himself too well. The kiss would be followed by caresses. All would be lost.

"Do you despise me then?" she whispered.

"I? No, no . . . I must get to work."

On the threshold she murmured again.

"I wonder how you two will manage together. I want lots of news."

He remained silent. She had not the strength to say it again . . . They would see, tomorrow.

As soon as he had freed himself, by a turn of the key, from the family and the flat, he opened his briefcase and pulled out files, laying them on the desk. In front of him, half-way from the model, he had placed the alarm-clock which always went with him on his travels.

With the same surprise as that of a man who examines the soil of a field and perceives a wholly unknown world, he watched the second-hand going round and listened to the regular waves of a limitless ocean falling with its tick. In what here was night and elsewhere was twilight or full daylight—everywhere there was the scurry of meditations, conclusions, hypotheses and the whole untiring toil of science, pouring along the road of time.

Down a uranium mine in the Erzgebirge a convict was feeling the sweat-soaked shirt on his back with his sticky hands. The young pilot who at dawn would fly to and fro in great close sweeps across a mountain mass in the Sahara Desert to lay bare its contours as one peels an orange, had pushed away his bed-clothes and was groaning—his head already full of the vibrations of his geiger counter.

The second-hand went on trotting. It was time, even more than space, that countries and men were fighting for . . . No chance of discoveries without the sufferings of the flesh.

6

AT SEVEN IN THE MORNING, WHEN HE WENT INTO THE DINING-room, Michel found the table already laid. In front of his coffee cup, against the pot of marmalade (she hadn't even forgotten that!), an envelope addressed to him was waiting.

'As I don't want the children to know of our difficulties,' Juliette wrote, 'I'm using this method, absurd as it is between married people. But speaking of absurd things, I wish to inform you that you must not have any illusions about my apparent resignation. It has been too easy for you to make me play a stupid part—that of the peasant woman who can always be checked in

whatever she wants to do by ponderously reminding her that she "went wrong" as a girl. I have not "gone wrong"—at least not in any way that you have the right to describe like that. In spite of the wounding things you have said, I still respect you. I am sure that after my letter you will be willing to take a more correct line. Without saying anything about it, though, for once again, all this must remain between us two.'

Michel tore up the message and stuffed the pieces into his pocket. A sharp feeling of bitterness took hold of him. That night he had worked with such passion, and just now, emerging from his short sleep, he had realized that the ideas held water and that he was now on a track that was really leading somewhere. All this business of his family was odiously ill-timed !

Let's make an end of it, he thought, and he strode towards the kitchen, where *she* must surely have taken refuge while he was reading her letter.

He opened the door and stopped short. Louise also was there—he had forgotten her existence—and gave him a hostile look. Her mistress certainly had not breathed a word of anything, but she would have guessed everything, all the same.

"Are you ready for some more coffee? You didn't sleep too badly?" Juliette asked, with a cold and ironical benevolence. And before he could reply she walked over to him and offered her cheek. He kissed it.

A minute later they were in the dining-room, sitting opposite one another.

"I must . . ." he began violently.

She rapped hard with her spoon on the table :

"None of that today. You've made certain decisions, carry them out. We shall see the results in a week. Your conduct would be unbearably common if you insisted always on having the last word."

After a while he decided not to answer. Expense of energy was reserved for higher occasions. In his mind's eye he saw again the emphatic second-hand of his alarm-clock marking out as essential each second of the night.

He reached for the marmalade.

And indeed, on the whole, it went off not too badly. The boy

had grasped that he was going on a journey, and he applauded solemnly. He did not notice his mother's worried face. He pressed his nose against the window, looking out at the street, which began to seem strange now that he was leaving it right in the middle of a school term. And when he heard his father's voice refusing Juliette's proposal to drive them herself to the station—it was so simple to ring for a taxi!—he had cried out, in an instinctive male solidarity already rebellious against any effusiveness :

"We'll manage ! We're grown up enough, we two !"

There was no way of knowing whether Juliette had slept, whether she had been crying, how many sleeping pills she had taken : the chemistry of powders and creams had also made remarkable progress. The important thing was still that she should keep her eyes dry and not go away to brood in her own room.

The telephone rang. Louise took the call.

"It's for Monsieur."

"Put it through to me in my study."

It was Martineau for Michel. He had just had a telephone call from Launay.

"Yes, old man, and I want to take your pulse—psychically speaking—before letting you go off to join him. I opposed you yesterday at Saclay, just as I'm ready to do every time ideas require it, and you know that makes no difference. Well, here goes with my bomb. It seems you're threatened with a strike down there. On the building-sites of *B* and *C*."

Michel was unable to suppress an exclamation of rage.

"That would be idiotic ! Tell me what Launay said, as much as you can repeat to me."

"You'll see, old man, when you get there. That's all I was told. And here's the real reason why I'm ringing you up. I know how loyal you are : you won't think of raising your yesterday's plan again even if the situation seems to be giving you leave to do that ; but what I'm afraid of is that the avalanche of difficulties may make us lose perspective. While I don't mean to substitute myself for Aubier, who's your chief and a superb chief, I'm not forgetting that we form a team. I've called you first, out of order, for the prosaic reason that I won't be able to reach you in the train. In my view you must go on concentrating, as priority, on your Control

Problem. What I shall call the Renoir Problem. At the same time as you goad the chaps on to getting the pile working again . . .”

When, at the end of a quarter of an hour, Martineau had finished explaining his work programme and asked Michel for his opinion, Michel gave his complete approval, subject to Aubier's agreement. ‘Avalanche of difficulties’—the word was not too strong. But in spite of everything they would find a way to reduce them to order.

He put down the receiver and immediately remembered all his domestic worries. If Juliette knew what he had just heard, would she be generous enough not to triumph? To think that he had talked of taking Michel junior away with him.

What? Talked of taking him? He was taking him, of course—there was no other solution.

He went back into the room where the packing was going on.

“Something wrong?” Juliette asked.

He glanced at himself surreptitiously in a glass. It was true, he looked gloomy.

“Nothing,” he snapped. “None of your business.”

The boy turned and looked at him attentively. Michel was afraid he might have alarmed him.

“Those are not things for you to worry your head over,” he said to his wife with a strange gentleness.

He had rung again and again, the line was still engaged. Was he going to miss his train? Juliette, in the distance, was watching his vain efforts. She no longer spoke of driving them. After all, he had defeated her . . . Perhaps she was not, unfortunately, the principle obstacle . . .

“Auteuil? Did you ask for a taxi? One will be round in four minutes.”

Should he kiss her? He remembered her outline that night in the armchair in his study, and tenderness, even love, flowed through him, coming from far distant regions within him. He stiffened. A person who had defended a Thomas-Laborde no longer existed. She was quite capable of telephoning to her sweetheart as soon as he had gone out of the front door.

“Be obedient and don't worry your father,” she was saying to her son in an exaggeratedly high voice. She had found the time,

during Martineau's telephone call, to put on a dress. "And don't forget to wash your feet and clean your teeth."

She opened a door.

"Pierrette? Claudine?"

Of course, of course, a Greuze scene just when he was making ready to face high battles of ideas, men and machines.

These bits of children, so like their mother that it was infuriating.

"When are you going to bring me back some chocolates?" lisped Claudine, while Pierrette curtseyed and said: "I wish you a good journey."

That was what things had come to! He, who in his childhood had stolen potatoes from the fields, now had daughters who spoke to him like ladies. If the bastards who intended to go on strike down there could hear that, what a laugh they would have!

He kissed the fresh faces which, in his honour, smelt of eau de cologne more than usual, and a muttered "Be good" escaped him.

"Why are you going?" murmured Claudine.

Juliette pushed the child aside:

"I keep telling you not to ask grown-up people questions."

Michel junior delightedly ran from the window, crying that the taxi was drawing up. It was a DS-19 with a hood. The little girls opened wide eyes at their brother's luck.

Juliette and Michel shook hands.

Claudine had a 'Why don't you kiss each other?' on the tip of her tongue, but since it was forbidden to ask questions—

On the landing, by the lift, *she* put out a hand to detain him:

"You've done what you wanted," she whispered. "I shall find it hard to forget. You've only yourself to blame for anything that may happen."

Before he could reply, she had shut the door of the flat behind her.

"Daddy, shall we go to the restaurant car?"

"Yes . . . Don't bother me now."

The boy was dumbfounded. Since his father wasn't driving, couldn't one talk to him? He had no pen or pencil in his hand, no sign that he was working . . . The drive again became absorbing. That hood which went up and down like something alive was

as funny as a clown. Did the driver, a dark young man very quick off the mark, know how lucky he was? To drive this monster down the Champs-Élysées . . . Jobs like that were the interesting ones.

Michel had put up his overcoat collar. He pretended to be far away. But clearly, as though on a radar screen, he was following the course of the boy's thoughts, and he felt full of bitterness. Was that what it was, a Michel junior? What had bitten him that he should encumber his life with this little creature, a shameless admirer of all that was tinsel, at a time when he was up to the neck in worries? He might as well have taken Pierrette or Claudine. Why not ask the taxi driver to turn round and put the child down at the Rue Raynouard? The little head seemed to have its father's good bone structure. Seemed. In reality it was all wet, as wet as could be.

A shower spattered down. To the child's great joy the screen-wiper had begun snoring, beating out against the glass the waltz of its couple of shoes.

"Down there we shall find the sun," muttered Michel absent-mindedly, and he closed his eyes to avoid a conversation. The only thing interesting about the sun was its wealth of energy, was it not? And what had that to do with him, since he worked in another branch? What he would find at Damezan was the threat of a strike, if not the strike itself.

A sound of voices aroused him. The taxi was going at a great speed along the Quai Henri IV, and the driver had just turned on his radio-receiver. "12 Rue des Morillons . . . 37 Rue Gallieni at Courbevoie . . . Who will take the Rue des Morillons? Can't hear . . . 4-14, speak a bit slower . . ." Michel junior was following the ceremony with religious attention. A DS-19 radio-taxi—that was really something.

The woman's voice, which had broken in, said rapidly: "Hallo, is that 2-23? Hallo, is that 2-23?"

Like a robot, the driver's left hand had quickly taken up the telephone mouthpiece and put it close to his face. "2-23 here," the man said, with his hands still on the steering-wheel and his eyes on the road.

"2-23, you're wanted at three this afternoon at 51 Rue Champion . . . I will repeat that . . ."

"I've got that."

"Thank you, 2-23."

Michel junior was filled with wonder and would have liked an explanation. He looked at his father.

"There are people," said his father wearily, "who prefer a particular driver and particular car."

The driver had heard. He burst out laughing.

"You've got the wrong end of the stick! I'm a blood-donor, blood group 1. The Rue Champion is a clinic. They must want me for an operation."

Michel laid his left hand gently on his son's head. Here at last was something fortunate, something which broke the mediocrity of this day which had begun with strike rumours. Something that made sense of the journey the two Michels were making together. No, if he had stayed with his mother, the brat would never have had the chance to live through this scene.

7

ON A CHAIR, A YARD AWAY FROM MME VAUVERT, HIS SON Michel was sitting, deep in an illustrated paper. No school-book had ever enchanted him like this.

"What's that muck you're reading?"

The young woman stopped typing.

"I gave him that copy of *Tintin*, sir. All the children of his age enjoy that."

"I dare say. At his age I had finished Jules Verne and was a subscriber to *Science et Vie*."

"Oh, you, sir!" she simpered, divided between genuine admiration and a desire to protect the boy, "I'm sure you were a precocious child."

"Why shouldn't he want to be one? He's my son, isn't he?"

Michel junior did not move. He was listening to the conversation with his fine dark head slightly on one side.

"Give that rubbish back," said his father, "and follow me."

The child got up. Without a word and with his eyes lowered he put the paper down. Madame Vauvert, who felt vexed, said nothing. The presence of that child at Damezan was heavy with

drama. A woman who was really a woman should try to see clearly and help.

"Don't forget, sir," she said, "I'm at your disposal after working hours. If you would like me to do any shopping for Michel . . ."

"Good, good."

"Sit down there. Don't touch anything. And give me a moment."

He was looking in the direction of the window. He had always liked to project his thoughts on to a screen of sky. Each person has his own ways. Other people needed a blackboard . . .

In the end the child looked in the same direction. He craned his neck, he put his head down . . . the sky remained boringly empty.

The grown-up noticed none of this. He was weighing up his first impressions on return. He would not have believed that the stoppage of the pile could have produced in the Centre, in spite of the resolute activity of the best men there, such a sluggish atmosphere. The continued silence of the fan had about it a mocking, sly, funereal quality which in the long run became unbearable. It was as if the Damezan plateau were refusing to retain its sacred character and were groaning ceaselessly into space in all directions: 'The French pile's gone west! . . . The French pile's gone west!' This was nonsense of course, there was merely a delay in the carrying out of the programme, but landscapes are even harder to convince than men are!

He wondered whether, in spite of the apparent technical precision of their claims, the lads who were urging a strike had not been influenced by this disconcerting lull. None of them had been told the exact facts, but like radioactive dusts there are always specks of information that get through. The stoppage of *A* was an immediate datum which, whether one liked it or not, struck the workers on *B* and *C* as soon as they arrived at the Centre. And didn't rats leave a sinking ship?

For in fact, according to what he had just been told, there was no real discontent about working conditions. Some of them might be feeling a vague discouragement, but it had not yet produced any desire for a break. The politically-minded ones were cautious and the rank and file fought shy at the very idea of a strike. It all

came down to the distribution of some tracts by four or five fellows, always the same ones, making, in moderate tones, a claim to a rise of wages and supporting it with figures. Perhaps if the directors of the contracting firm were willing to make an effort at once . . .

No, not that. Let's first get the pile going again. But Aubier, who had gone back to Paris that night and whom Michel had been able to see for two hours last evening in the station restaurant at Arles, was not exactly optimistic. Certainly, as the Saclay people had said, 'there was no question about it', the pile would be restarted. But when? This time the replacement of the rods was turning out to be much less simple. Unforeseen technical difficulties had arisen. The solutions would be found, but would require days or even weeks. While in the process of modifying certain parts of the apparatus, they would have to resume several laboratory experiments.

"Madame Vauvert? Get me Monsieur Martineau, at Saclay, please."

"Right away, sir."

He slammed the receiver down and looked again towards the window, in an attempt to project upon the great moving clouds, swollen like hydrangea blossoms, the thoughts of the plutonium chief.

The telephone rang.

"Monsieur Martineau isn't there. Shall I ask his secretary to find him?"

"Get me Monsieur Muller. And after that, here, Monsieur Cahuzac."

"Yes, sir."

"Sorry, cut out Muller and Saclay. Just Cahuzac."

The name Muller, associated as it was with what had happened in Paris, had reminded him of his son's presence. The boy might be getting bored . . .

Michel junior did not respond to his father's smile. He was becoming a mere mass of boredom. He had hunched himself up in his chair.

"Sit up. Haven't you ever heard of scoliosis?"

The child jumped like a spring and sat right on the edge of his chair, leaning forwards with his hands on his knees. The grown

man lit a cigarette. To mend matters, he cast about for something amusing. But the telephone rang. It was Cahuzac. With the full, vibrant voice of a man who is going to talk at some length. Michel took up a paper-knife, closed one eye and his mind left the room.

Excellent: Cahuzac, too, was calm and sceptical about the threatened strike. The malcontents did not seem inclined to use the dangers of radioactivity as a blackmail: they were confining themselves to quite reasonable claims for a rise in wages. If the directors of the contracting firms showed a modicum of sense . . .

"Many of those lads," he was saying, "are trained technicians with some idea of industrial responsibilities. I only wish the natives of this part of the world would take the same line as they do about us . . . By the way, the detector—you remember the detector that was stolen on the night when the pile flared up?"

"Wait . . ."

Again he remembered the existence of Michel junior. The English homily 'Careless talk means danger' flashed into his mind. It would be beter to put off till later the hearing of this bit of information.

"Excuse me, *mon cher* Cahuzac, I'll ring you back. One of my people is just coming in." ¶

He hung up and without thinking, a few seconds later, laid his right hand flat against the nape of his son's neck. When the brat had been a baby in arms how often had he not supported the back of his head in this way? It had been warm and soft, fitting the palm exactly, as a uranium rod fits its cladding.

To hell with infantilism. That might be all right for a Thomas-Laborde . . .

"Tell me the truth," he said offhand, sitting down by the boy, "are you enjoying yourself?"

"Oh, yes, I'm enjoying myself," the other answered, careful not to commit himself. The grown-up, who was not seeking more than that, rubbed his hands. But the next moment, carried away by the vivacity natural at his age, the boy added, "All the same, there aren't many amusements here."

One had always to start again at the beginning. Always that. Michel frowned.

The child had noticed. With a sweet solemnity he said that he

understood : when they were building this whole town they couldn't think of children.

Michel took off his glasses and smiled. He liked the word 'town' as applied to the physico-chemical forces gathered at Damezan.

"I've a terrible lot of work, but for your sake, as an exception, I'm going to upset my programme. We'll go together and visit an atomic pile—" Deliberately he decided on a lie. "One at work."

Odd that he hadn't thought of this difficulty when he was bringing Michel to the Centre ! But the child would allow himself to be taken in.

"You must realize," he went on, "that you're a very lucky little boy. You're going to see things that are very rare and are shown to very few people."

Michel junior's eyes sparkled with pleasure. "Secret things," he proclaimed. And added at once, "Do they make the death-ray here ? I had a friend at school who swore you must be busy on that."

Michel coughed nervously. To think I put off Cahuzac and didn't ring Muller just to hear this tomfoolery, he thought . . . But before he could reply there was a knock at the door, which seemed to open of its own accord. The two security men, blue-uniformed and with revolvers at their belts, came in as usual, noiselessly and without looking at anyone. They went straight to the waste-paper basket. With a strict economy of movement, one of them emptied it into a large dark sack which the other held open. On the carpet there was a crumpled yellow sheet of paper ; he picked this up and added it to the rest . . . Still in silence the two men withdrew.

The child's eyes were starting out of its head.

"What do they do with the stuff they take away?" he asked with feverish excitement.

"They burn it. It's always done."

"Yes, yes. The secret plans ! Yes, I've got it ! Do they shoot people with their revolvers ? I thought one of them looked very calm. He must get a bull's-eye every time."

"Since I've been at Damezan——"

"Oh, Daddy, it's no use telling me lies. I quite understand."

"What have you understood ?"

The child put his chin up and winked. Michel could have hit him ! He lit a cigarette.

"Remember the radio-taxi yesterday?" he muttered, controlling himself. "We must look upon that blood-donor as a symbol of what you and I have to build. I beg you to stick to all that is noble, and worthy of sacrifice, and not to waste your time here looking for the things you find in your wretched illustrated papers. Secrecy, my poor boy, is very important, but it takes only second place. It's knowledge that matters, not its wrappings, however magnificent."

Stunned by this language, Michel junior hunched his shoulders. He could not tear his eyes away from the waste-paper basket.

"I'm boring you," said the grown-up. He waited impatiently for a contradiction that did not come. "We'll go," he concluded coldly.

But immediately they stopped. The father still had things to say. A pity he must conceal the condition of the pile. He would so much have liked to sing the praises of its progress!

"So that you may get the most out of your visit," he said, "I'll explain to you quickly what nuclear energy is (people call it atomic energy, but wrongly), and why it's so important."

The boy was not listening now. The scientific terms struck him, spat at him, rushed past his eyes like some preposterous ballet. He longed for his friends, the Paris flat and his mother's smile.

Three-quarters of an hour later the man and the child emerged in silence from the reactor hall.

"Well?" Michel asked.

During the tour of the pile Michel junior had yawned several times, but these kids, when hunger gnaws them—

"Well what?" the boy replied with candour.

Michel did not know what to say. With these soft minds one has to give one's questions a clever twist. At the end of that morning spent in struggling between a child and the invincibly technical nature of machines, the idea of an educational psychologist seemed to have something in it.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" he muttered.

"What's beautiful?"

The father almost foamed at the mouth. Was his son an idiot? What a bad marriage he had made!

"Well, everything! What one sees and what one guesses at—that terrifyingly heavy mass which is still so perfectly balanced,

that screen of silence behind which so many events go on, as real as they are invisible . . ." He fell silent. His heart was beating fast. The folly of singing the praises of the reactor with such enthusiasm to an ignoramus.

"Ah!" was all the boy said: "I think we don't understand enough of what's going on."

That remark was to the point, wasn't it? What was the brat driving at? The man clung once more to a hope. After having done everything to prevent his son from realizing that the pile was not working, he now longed for the brat to guess it all the same. A contradiction? Who cared? It would be such a fine intelligence test for Michel junior! Very gently he spoke to him of the splendid night of the atoms, stirring like some gigantic building yard, depth opening on ever more solemn depths, an image in reverse of the heavens.

"I and my colleagues," he declared, shaking his head, "are on the track of discoveries, at any moment possible, about those infinitesimal particles whose aggregation produces such enormous masses. Every scientist is also a schoolboy. We're like those great sturdy sharks which keep following tiny pilot-fishes. In front of us there are grains of matter, and we, fascinated, let go of everything else to get close behind them."

The child tried to imagine his father in the garb of a dogfish thrusting through the waters of a lake. It was no good.

He came back to an idea already well tried.

"Has the death-ray been discovered? It's stronger than the atomic bombs?"

The grown-up ground his teeth. He gave his son a furious look. The child had turned his back. Since his father said that every scientist was also a schoolboy, every schoolboy must be also a scientist. Indeed it was obvious. He stared thoughtfully at an electric light globe, hesitated, then noticed the huge sprinkler in one corner like a black spider.

"That really *is* beautiful," he said with conviction, laying one finger on his nose. "Does it work with your pile?"

His father's fist had already enclosed his hand. "Let's not waste any more time," he said roughly.

A broad smile lit up the powerful face. The man rushed to meet his two visitors, but seemed only to see the smaller one.

"I know you already," he said, stooping down to the boy's level. "You're the famous portrait-of-his-father."

Just look at old Bousso^t playing Nanny, these Catholics are incorrigible, thought Michel as he thumbed through the pages of an American scientific review he had found on the desk. Positrons. More about strontium. What can be expected from Zeta. Suddenly he started.

"Didn't Madame Renoir want to come with you to the Centre?" his friend was asking him. "I hope the journey from Paris to Arles wasn't too tiring for you both. The trains are comfortable, but when there are too many people——"

And yet, what sentences could be more commonplace?

"Excuse me, old man," Michel muttered with embarrassment, "you wouldn't have, in your briefcase, an illustrated paper belonging to one of your kids?"

The enormous Bousso^t could not help laughing. No, his briefcase contained only boring things. Then, practical as always, he remembered that his secretary was in the habit of buying *L'Équipe* for her husband.

Michel junior, whom decidedly the night of the atoms left indifferent, sat down in a corner, and an instant later, conducted by a journalist from Bordeaux, he was entering the Wembley football ground, where an international football match was about to begin.

"I came just with him," his father was explaining, in a low voice. "In this office, not long ago, I had occasion to tell you certain things——"

"Sorry. I remember. Stupid of me," Bousso^t stammered.

Images of that famous night revived in the memories of both men. When people have lived certain hours together how can they hurt one another?

"It's I who was stupid," Michel protested. "Choking you off, the morning after that night . . . I'd better tell you, anyhow, the situation is past all help."

Bousso^t glanced at the child. The words "poor little chap!" escaped him.

Their only effect was to harden the other man.

"You mean, bloody little bore," he snapped. "As a bloody little bore, I assure you, one couldn't do better. Hermetically sealed

against the great problems. Tarzan and *Tintin*. He makes me ashamed. That's not the stuff that will get the country out of the rut . . ."

There followed a silence. The engineer was afraid he would make matters worse if he contradicted too firmly.

"And you are initiating him into the problems of nuclear energy? Bravo!" he said at last. "Wasn't he frightened, near the pile?"

"Why should he be frightened?"

The silence was broken by the noise of the child settling his feet underneath him on one of the bars of the chair. Michel was about to leap forward and scold him, but Jacques held him back with a hand on his arm.

"Let him alone," he murmured. "I was forgetting: Iturribe rang me up twenty minutes ago, to tell me about a call from Paris. Next week two Members of Parliament are descending on us. A visit of information and inspection. They're bringing with them a geneticist—"

"—whose name is Thomas-Laborde?"

"You know all about it already? Excuse me."

Michel brought a vigorous hand down on his friend's shoulder.

"Don't ask me to explain. But I can tell you that if anyone has cheek, those people have. For myself, I refuse to see them. I'll have a word with Aubier, and he too, I'm sure, won't want to be around. You're the one, poor chap, who will have to do them the honours of the pile."

He was thinking: 'Of a pile that's not working'—but a quick smile lit up his face. He had suddenly made a decision.

8

THE DARK SKY, WHICH WAS THE CAR'S MOMENTARY TARGET, seemed to rise and sway: then, as the car reached the crest of the hill, a straight descent opened out ahead. Michel tightened his fingers on the steering-wheel. A wide, semi-obscure plain on which lay a few poor lights, and the grey body reached the first curve already! The Vedette leaned over and its tyres began to sing.

When it straightened up there was still, directly ahead, a ray of light lingering on after the sunset. It was bordered by a yellow halo, the magic cap of the vanished sun, which seemed to be propped up by the long, firm, concise silhouette of a cypress.

The man smiled, without derision, at the new interest he was taking in the splendour of natural objects. Perhaps he had a temperature, but he refused to give way to fatigue. He must go through with the job in hand. A mistake was not the same as a crime. The road grew darker still. Michel switched on the headlights.

The young woman driving alone, whose car had just reached the plateau of Dammartin-en-Goële and had begun a long, sharply zigzag descent, was no less confident in the value of the impulse on which she was acting. The eyes of a cat, which had jumped off a wall, seemed to spit out their phosphorus: it quickly became a little white ball, as it crouched low in the gutter.

Groups of lights, scattered over the plain, indicated villages. Families, with houses. Friendships trying to come to birth, loves seeking not to die.

Soon, to the left of the road, there would be the dark entrance to a large park. Dogs barking. The first trees of a mysterious avenue.

What had made her come so far? But how could one avoid the struggle? While Michel was proceeding with such violence, André had such a lack of decision: he met difficulties as one would meet a sand-storm from which there is no, absolutely no protection.

That morning he had shown great straightforwardness: he had rung her up, and without beating about the bush told her that the Ministry had him in mind as the right person to accompany Perreyve and Guerroy to Damezan. He asked courteously if it would be all right for him to accept the offer . . . Yes, of course, thought Juliette. But the truth is, he can hardly wait to see for himself and to attack the atomic scientists in the midst of their work. Michel would be wrong in thinking that André is against him personally. It's against a tendency, against a doctrine, that André wanted to go into action.

"You!" Françoise had closed her eyes. Her face turned pale and she drew back. "You!" she moaned once more.

He wanted to step forward, take her in his arms and kiss her, but he could not move.

"Let me come in," he stammered.

He clenched his teeth, as though this would induce anger, and muttered, shamefacedly. "Have I alarmed you?"

"I'm alarmed at myself, chiefly."

The old Michel would have hated that phrase, cried out that it was cheap literature: he, the new Michel, could find no answer.

Out in the countryside a dog barked. The primitive noise, muffled by distance, evoked memories of the old yellow half-torn illustrations to books of legends—the blazing hearths, horsemen riding down long roads, talismans, captive princesses.

The situation was saved. Their eyes met.

"Since you've come back, I shan't drive you away," she said with a sad smile. "Come in. We must try to see things clearly."

André came himself to open the front door. He apologized for his white overall. He seemed worried about something.

"The experiments," he muttered as he helped Juliette out of her fur coat, "aren't going as one could wish . . . Not very clever of me to say that, but I'm past the age when one wants to shine."

"You mean your fellow-student of the year after yours is an old featherbrain?"

"Come off it, slyboots!"

He took her by the hand and led her to a Venetian glass in which he looked at her.

"You're always freshness itself," he murmured in a tone of great sincerity.

She tapped him on the cheek:

"I know I'm not getting any younger."

"What nonsense! Bernadette," he shouted, "if anyone rings up, ask them to ring again tomorrow morning."

He opened a door.

"You'll be better in here, there's a wood fire waiting for you."

Juliette stopped on the threshold of the drawing-room, a vast room, somewhat shabby though still noble, in which the subtle

lighting brought out the fine forms of the tapestries, which represented princely betrothals. The smell from the logs seemed to come from far down the centuries, like that of a cave that has been suddenly laid bare. A cat slept indifferently on the hearthstone. An enormous sheaf of gladioli sprang from an Etruscan pot.

"Will you think me indiscreet," she asked, "if I have a look at your office? It's the first time I've ever been here."

Was the explanation a sufficient one? In any case her host's put-out expression and his evasion of a reply egged her on.

"Wait a minute while I tidy it up," he muttered at last.

Without hesitating she moved in front of him and threw her arms around his neck :

"You will let me go first. I promise you, your old fellow-student of medicine won't take offence at your pin-up girls !"

He laughed, rather stiffly. She had all of a sudden used the familiar '*tu*' : did that mean——?

"Come along, then," he murmured.

What was there so secret about that cold, calm office, in which one could read the meticulous orderliness of the investigator? The magnifying glass, the files, the microscope, the precision balance—all was exactly in its right place, including the few pictures on the walls, enlarged photographs of mammoth and auroch bones and aerial views of great herds in Africa.

Juliette walked to the table in the centre and, pretending to imitate André at work, sat down at it and moved various piles of papers about. From her friend's face she could tell she was getting hot. She pulled towards her and slowly opened the file on the top of the pile.

"You don't let yourself get bored !"

What she saw was a small snapshot representing . . . Christiane Girardot. The girl, in tennis dress with a racket under her arm, seemed like a charming incarnation of the joy of life.

"These *île-de-France* scientists will always go for the *midinette* rather than for mathematics."

"Please . . ." he murmured.

"Your girl friend is charming, but a smile that shows every tooth in her head is really ridiculous."

He rapped Juliette's knuckles and took the photograph away from her.

"You're being very small-minded, it isn't like you."

"It isn't like you, either, such secrecy."

"What do you mean? Simply because, eleven years ago——"

He checked himself, too late. She had guessed, and her cheeks went red. She hid her head in her hands.

"Is that the only memory you've retained?" she moaned.

"Listen, darling . . ."

He saw, for he was quite close to her, that at the term of endearment she had opened her eyes behind her fingers and was listening hard. And suppose her tears concealed a trap? He would gladly console her. Not be taken in.

"—we'd be more comfortable in the drawing-room."

The banality of the remark rang like an insult. In a second Juliette was on her feet. With a scientific eye he admired the way in which her hair and her complexion had remained intact.

"More comfortable in the drawing-room?" she mocked. "For discussing politics, I suppose! Don't talk to me like that after what there's been between us. Haven't I enough to put up with, with Michel's cruelties?"

Silently he flung up his arms. The whole scene seemed to him forced.

"No, André," she resumed gently, "you're not behaving like a man who has been in love with a woman. Couldn't you feel that Michel and I are on the edge of divorce? He's taken *his* son away from me, down there, to his Damezan."

"Did you let him? Why didn't you tell me these things on the telephone?"

"I knew we were going to meet this evening."

He opened the door. Certainly the atmosphere of the office was not right for this conversation. Juliette went out first. Without her noticing, he turned aside and, picking up a file, slipped the photograph of Christiane inside it.

Even before they had reached the staircase, Michel had seized Françoise in his arms, and it seemed to both of them that that was the 'seeing clear' of which she had just spoken.

If all my problems, he thought as he breathed in the scent of her hair, had this same marvellous simplicity!

He covered with kisses the eyes whose misty grey he loved so

well. But neither he nor she were now forgetful adolescents. When they again stood side by side and had exchanged more smiles and caresses, they were forced to realize that the appeasement of desire had solved nothing.

Françoise picked up a paper from the desk.

"The reason why I received you as I did," she said, handing it to him.

An envelope addressed to Mlle Romieu. Michel looked at it blankly. It was he, of course, who had written that name and that address. But in that fission-product of an earlier determination which he now repudiated, he simply could not recognize himself. Had some clown guided his hand? It was as stupid as that.

The proof was that thick post-mark, spelling out in capitals the word *VANVES-SEINE*. He had thought it clever to post his letter in one of the suburbs, but he had never imagined the physical effect of this real profanation.

It remained to reread his letter.

Why? To confirm that he now would wish to have nothing to do with those two idiotic phrases? He crumpled and tore up the paper.

"Thanks for the lesson. I realize that old age is at the door."

Françoise protested, but he refused to listen. She fell silent for a few moments. She knew and admired the will to work that was hidden under what seemed a gloomy confession. Michel had a sharp perception of the value of time.

"I'm the last person entitled to preach to you," she said at length.

"Why?"

"You will judge . . ."

She spoke in a low voice but hammering out her words. He raised his head. He had never for a second suspected what she was now revealing to him.

Had he nearly killed an honest, reckless cyclist? He had merely thought so, for the young woman who had ridden straight at his car was seeking suicide . . .

At the last moment, she explained, the fear of the shock, and a furious need to live, had seemed to wrench her off the road. She had thrown herself to the right. After her fall, when she had

found herself unhurt, a strange happiness had flooded through her. The feeling of resurrection . . .

There was a silence.

"I shall never do such an idiotic thing again."

"You can boast of having put me on a false scent," said Michel. "You women will always be masters in the art of deception!"

He was now pacing up and down at the end of the great room whose lights and shadows enchanted him.

"I consider suicide," he resumed, "as a supreme cowardice. I'm weighing my words. I think I'm really fond of you; but without that last sentence of yours I believe I should have left you, and this time not to come back."

"Your frankness is rough and good," she murmured sadly. "Perhaps it isn't me you're fond of, but your own picture of me. Try to be kind. Perhaps there has to be, in everyone's life, that moment of truth, so that he or she can feel completely that living also is a duty."

"Your miserable little experience has no right to the name you're giving it."

He had sat down beside her on the red divan and, while smoking a cigarette and holding her hand, had begun to think hard. It was days, it was a week of truth that *he* had gone through at the moment when, immediately after the accident to the pile, he had thought he was up against them all and in the dock. Absurd, yet great, like a lion-tamer without any weapon. Or a king advancing alone across a square in which rebellion is growling.

"What are you thinking about?"

"I haven't the right to tell you."

He smiled with an expression of kindness she had never seen in him before.

If anyone was worthy to share his secret, he was thinking, it must be this woman. In the ultra-confidential report he had written, he had summed the whole thing up with scrupulous accuracy, and yet, in a way, he had said nothing. He had suppressed himself, as an individual actor. He had left the whole stage to the pile and the control room. And neither Aubier, nor Launay, nor Martineau had later allowed himself even once to return to the matter and to question him as a human being—as Renoir.

He himself had, as far as possible, avoided analysing that mixture of hope and doubt, of fear, pride and certainty . . . Yet oughtn't one to probe to the core of those hours of bitterness which later, with the passage of time, come to deserve the wonderful title: hours of truth? Where would he do this better than in the privacy of that room, remote from his struggles? When the words were already hurrying to his lips?

Had he ever told her how much he loved his profession? How he admired the nuclear reactor? He had let himself go far more with that woman Chayriguès.

But the personal struggle remained inexpressible. A stupid boasting (a thing quite different from forceful pride) would have sullied the words. Samson describing to Delilah his nights of vigilance, his battle plans and the number of his enemies—each word he spoke would mean some vital force lost. And the boasting would be all the more silly since, in sober scientific reality, Michel shared all his secrets with matter.

The silence had been a long one.

"Don't be disappointed in me," he said. "In friendship" (he had not dared say 'in love'; he could not make out whether the word seemed to him too strong or too weak) "as in a book, it's not necessary to express everything. Perhaps you will soon find out how much you mean to me."

He gazed into the wide dark eyes which, for all their brilliance, were as silent as the charge-face of the pile.

When he spoke again she thought she had not heard him aright. No, she was not mistaken, he was really asking whether she had a method of teaching. He wanted to know the official opinions on her work as a teacher.

What a strange man. But the idea of criticizing him did not enter her head.

She leant back on her cushion and began her answer. He listened with attention.

"I make great demands on my pupils," she said. "I haven't so many years' experience, and I've been interrupted during these last months, but I don't think I shall ever change. What I hate above all is the spirit of idleness. Which indeed takes a rich variety of forms. I remember a little girl from Périgord . . ."

After a minute he had stood up and begun to wander about with

his hands in his pockets. He walked very softly. It was evident that he was not missing a word.

When she dismissed in a single phrase the favourable report made by one of the inspectors, he asked her, from the other end of the room, to give it in full. She obeyed at once.

When she considered she had said enough, she had been talking for half an hour. She did not feel tired. She felt only a warm and strange gratitude to the man who had subjected her to this ordeal. Apart from her late fiancé, nobody had taken so attentive an interest in her teaching.

"In short," he said after a silence, "the charming creature who is now before me conceals a teacher of the severe kind. I like that. There are so many resources, to begin with, in a human being who is entrusted to you for teaching. What a lot of wasted opportunities . . ."

He realized with embarrassment that he was thinking of Juliette. He licked his lips.

In a clear voice, and as though it were a long-matured idea not open to discussion, he revealed to her the plan he had thought of at Damezan that same morning: to bring Michel junior to live here, beginning tomorrow, and for her to teach him. Was it not a solution with advantages to everyone? The boy was unstable, he needed firm supervision (to prevent him, above all, from turning into a literary type!); and Françoise, who had been on holiday for nearly a year, needed to get her hand in again before once more taking up her profession.

"And I'm not forgetting," he added quickly, "the secret you told me. Your idiotic conduct was because you were out of work."

With tears in her eyes and with her long fingers rumpling a small lace handkerchief, Françoise lowered her head. Her ears were humming.

"... not troublesome . . . the siesta time . . . find someone to do the cooking . . . the money side . . ."—the words came one after another, vigorous and clear, and she could find no objection. The old house, whose coolness and calm she had enjoyed, was suddenly coming to seem a gloomy barrack in immediate need of the cries, the toings and froings of a child to cheer it up.

Now she looked up at him. She felt she ought to have contradicted him, but she knew also that she could not. Images of the

sanatorium came back into her memory. No, her life up to now had been none too happy, and yet in what had she done wrong?

This man's child must have a lively, fresh intelligence which it would be wonderful to guide.

And the woman whose son he was?

Françoise was forgetting nothing, but Michel talked too fast. She would never know whether she had in fact uttered words of acceptance : suddenly, in a few seconds, they had reached agreement.

Michel junior would arrive next day, towards evening.

The man looked at his watch. A good thing accomplished, was all he was thinking.

They went downstairs and through the large empty rooms of the ground floor without a single word.

On the threshold, none the less, he kissed her. A very short kiss: he was already afraid, she could feel, of being late. She withdrew her face into the shadow and asked :

"And suppose your son were homesick for his mother?"

"Don't worry. You look after him and I'll look after her. Till tomorrow."

She still had the strength to smile.

Between André's office and his drawing-room Juliette had reconstructed her plan of action. In spite of her ridiculous tears, nothing was lost.

"Show me the way to your bathroom. I must do some repairs to my face after all that."

André obeyed willingly. He said he would use those few moments to cast an eye over the table, for dinner was at seven.

She burst out laughing. "As in a convent?"

"Not a bad comparison."

She laughed again and they separated.

Juliette found a subtle pleasure in wandering about this unknown house, inhabited by a man without a wife. What a good idea this escapade had been ! How happy Pierrette and Claudine would be, if certain things came to pass, gambolling down these passages. And to leave such a garden to a person like Christiane Girardot seemed monstrous : the young people of nowadays, as everyone knows, don't care for the country . . .

She was examining the bathroom when she heard a long faint ringing, rather like a burglar alarm. She looked at her wrist watch. It was seven. Alone as she was, she laughed out loud. André's going off his head, I must shake him up.

He had no sooner led her into the dining-room than it became clear that he was not the flexible person he used to be. Had she said 'convent'? It was far nearer the truth than she had thought. To bed at ten, rise at seven. And two tours of inspection during the night. One glass of wine per meal. Three cigarettes a day. Maté tea instead of coffee.

"At your age? You're mad!"

"My dear Juliette, a man must make up his mind what he wants. We're living in a time when heart trouble is very common. I don't want to die before I have finished my work."

She flung up her arms.

"You're just like Michel! Really I can't think why the two of you have got across each other. My work, *my* work! And what about your happiness?"

"I am happy, very happy."

She said, and repeated, that he was not telling the truth. Then she laughed:

"Little Christiane will get a shock!"

He did not answer.

"Oh, yes," she insisted heavily, "after all, isn't making love also apt to cause heart trouble? I can't see your liaison lasting more than a week."

André drank a glass of water.

"My ducks and frogs," he snapped, "never put on sentiments or emotions. Why are you so malicious?"

"Because I'm thinking of your happiness."

And she continued immediately with phrases she had prepared beforehand. The solitude in which André lived was becoming, whether he liked it or not, abnormal. He ought to marry again, and it was urgent. But not at random. Some little modern butterfly would at first scare and then paralyse a man of his sensibility, who had already suffered so much and who was full—and quite rightly—of the importance of his work. He needed a real wife, who would do everything to understand him and to spare him fatigue.

"Suppose," she murmured, "Michel drives me to divorce. I'm not yet ugly, and I've more energy than the so-called young. You see what I'm leading up to . . . My daughters, whom you know well, and who, you realize, are almost as fond of you as they are of their father, would be your daughters . . ."

André had taken her hand. "How generous you are, my poor Juliette!"

He hesitated. He was thinking of all his little animals asleep in their proper places at the bottom of the garden, and of all the hopes that depended on them . . . But things were reaching a point where no man of honour could evade the issue. He must speak out clearly.

He looked at Juliette. He no longer blamed her for having said dangerous things, for she had precipitated the situation: in laboratories, after the monotony of waiting, there came movements and crucial moments.

"Do you love Michel?"

She looked him straight in the eyes. Lying was impossible.

"A little, I think, still . . . but . . ."

He stopped her. "Don't say any more."

"But I will." She took her hand away from his. "I won't allow him to treat me as he is doing. I demand that he should give me back my son before a fortnight is up. He may be a wonderful man, but he hasn't the right to smash up the boy's upbringing."

André shrugged his shoulders, and said, with the frankness of an old friend, "If you could hear yourself speaking, I think you would soon realize how much of his influence you've absorbed. One of the things you said just now bore his signature. It was when you maliciously made fun of my new friend's smile. The invisible Michel had prompted every one of your words."

They remained silent. Juliette was dying to ask him, in turn, "And you—are you in love with Christiane?"—but her feminine pride was afraid of the answer . . . And besides, that was an escape path, and a woman must always face her problems.

"I shall accept the Ministry's proposal," said André. "At Damezan I shall surely find some way of helping you."

"Without damaging Michel's work!"

"You see, you love him!" he murmured.

They exchanged smiles. Juliette, who would have liked to

defend herself against the charge of weakness, tried at some length to make the distinction between the scientist and the husband in the one man, but without success.

"Don't torment yourself," the geneticist resumed. "I don't know if my life is of any importance, but you have a vital place in it. You helped me at the worst moment, and that—"

He had come to detest sentimentality, and so broke off the sentence and said, "Thanks to you, my love for science has increased, and science has made of me, out of a spineless person, something like a man. Something like a Will. My work now is my passion. There've been results—terrible setbacks, sometimes, but such fruitful ones!—and I think I see success ahead. Genetics, believe me, has remarkable inspiration to offer a man's mind. To protect men against their all too natural inclination to follow the laws of least resistance . . . To preserve in them the sense of the beauty of the world . . . Shove their noses into that examination of their consciences which, without knowing it, they perform afresh every twenty-four hours, and which ought to make so many things possible . . . No, I'm not wandering."

He rang for the old servant.

"I'm going to do violence to my régime and ask for a bottle—no, a half-bottle will do—of champagne. Let's remain friends. Let's drink to the past and the present. Let's pledge ourselves to defend what remains of freedom in the world."

His voice was trembling slightly. Wasn't he beginning to be sentimental?

"Shall we finish the evening in a night club at Chantilly?" she interrupted softly.

The man frowned heavily.

"I've an experiment on hand that's too important. My assistants wouldn't understand. And they'd be right."

"I'm terribly depressed . . ."

"Stay here tonight," he proposed in a neutral voice, after a silence.

Bernadette came in. Her expression was dark and dry, and her chin sharp. She looked only at the table, but it was easy to guess that her attention was all on Juliette.

André asked her gaily for the half-bottle, hesitated for a moment, and then added: "Madame Renoir is going to sleep

here. Please get ready everything she will need. Take a pair of my pyjamas."

The old woman sighed and turned on her heel.

"A pillar of the Church?" Juliette asked.

"A hundred-per-cent rationalist, like everyone here—my assistants, my staff and my animals."

"Then why such an expression on her face?"

"A bit left over from the old tabus, the novels would say . . . I must confess that I'm beginning to waver about these things. I regard myself as a perfect rationalist and yet . . . Let's talk of something else."

"Are you getting up tonight for your experiment?"

"Yes. Twice. Each time for a quarter of an hour, if all goes well . . . A quarter to half an hour."

"Be a dear, André, and give me a knock on my door when you get up. I'd like to go with you. It'll remind me of my student years."

"You'll die of cold!" he protested sharply. "And besides, I'm afraid what you'd see would disappoint you."

But she had an answer to everything.

"All right then," he said shortly. He did so merely to make an end of it. Deep down in him he was determined to go alone that night to the summerhouse hidden at the bottom of the garden.

The servant, with her eyes lowered, laid the small bottle on the table. She listened to the rest of his orders and disappeared.

Juliette smiled sadly :

"She's afraid, isn't she, that I shall seduce her master?"

"She's very sensible," André murmured, as he uncorked the bottle with a surgeon's efficiency. "I'm not made of wood . . ."

"Well?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's not be silly. We're not children now."

She did not dare reply. A longing for vengeance had come over her. Against all men. André the phlegmatic, Michel the disdainful! All right, there would be their meetings during the night.

As André poured out the cool cascades of champagne which sparkled like foam in sunshine, the telephone rang. Twice. He laid down the bottle. He was haunted by images of his experiments. Juliette was thinking of her daughters.

AT ABOUT TEN IN THE EVENING THE TREES STIRRED IN THE silence. It was the hordes of the mistral descending. The traditional whistling arose. Vast herds were rushing through the sky. They would go on all night, without stopping.

The man's body began to remember. Recognized the wind that, full of its brash violence, had blown during the night when the rod had flared up . . . Michel was only half asleep. In the blackness he seemed to feel the telephone receiver, impatient as a stallion on the watch for some alarm. It began to get on his nerves. Alarms were in fact still possible, though the pile was not working.

Once he got up, to listen closely to the breathing of his sleeping son. And then a second time, to spread a coat over the boy's bed. 'Poor little chap', Boussot had murmured : what did that mean? Removed from his mother's fantasies and indulgences Michel junior would expand his powers. Finished, for him, the idiotic reading of the illustrated papers. From Jules Verne he would pass straight on to scientific knowledge and would prepare himself to become an outstanding collaborator for his father.

And Françoise? She would be sleeping soundly, deeply, in accordance with her nature. The suicide attempt had been based on an aberration : it would not recur. Did he love her?

Mistral blows battered at the sky, in which the glimmering points of stars were welling up continuously, firm in their place, like the end-caps of the uranium rods. The cracking of tree trunks rang again and again through the length of the garden with a sinister energy, suggesting the massive explosions of an abandoned munitions dump—the chain reaction of the vast storm.

The telephone was forgetting to ring. Or had some of the poles come down, snapping the wires? Every second had the weight of the destiny of millions of men.

The pale azure, in which not the smallest cloud flew by, shuddered in the wind. Invisible whips were cracking. The air smelt of frozen gorse and rock.

To perceive with such clearness, he thought, I must be suffering from strain. He remembered Françoise and smiled. Well, well, so atomic scientists had ceased to be gay dogs? Balzac, a writer who would have fully deserved to be a scientific researcher, had already pointed out certain distressing incompatibilities . . . But enough of these trifles. The work, simply the work. Let us bring back to Damezan the fruitful days. Plutonium, plutonium, plutonium. Let the pile start working again . . .

As her chief came in Mme Vauvert raised her eyes. She would have liked to ask how the child had slept, but duty first : she said, in a very official tone, that M. Launay had just that moment rung up.

"Ring him back," he said, taking off his lumber-jacket. "I'll go into my office."

That meant, almost certainly, something gone wrong. And so many things could go wrong. The strike? Yesterday evening those in the know had given seven to one against.

"Hallo, Renoir? Launay. This time I think this is it."

The voice was neither annoyed nor cheerful. Grave, but not more than usual. Always that suspicion of a secret irony, remaining unchanged by good or bad fortune.

"What is 'it', *Monsieur le Directeur*?"

"Allow me to admire your calm. I mean the strike."

"No !"

"Yes."

The reply was sharp; a scientist would never have the right to ignore an event.

"I'm a fool," muttered Michel, "please forgive me."

"It's not for me to forgive you. I'm expecting you. I am summoning the heads of sections."

All the others had already arrived in the Director's office. That represented a lot of grey matter, he thought, and the strike and its instigators would certainly not have the better of it. Cahuzac. Iturribe. Martineau. Rouquiès. De Pennguern. Plus Dupraz, the future Bousso of *B* and *C*. Plus the invisible presence of Aubier, whose plans were at stake . . . In short, the young Cabinet of the independent principality of Damezan, summoned urgently to decide on the reply to a rebellion of its mercenaries.

The long table had on it two models : *B* and *C*. Also a pile of blue-prints.

Outside, beyond the windows through which the natural light came in, there was the camp, there were the demands of nuclear purity, there was a pile, a programme, buildings under construction, millions of human movements and of dangerous chemical operations which were now in suspense.

"*Messieurs . . .*"

The word sounded like the tap of the conductor's baton on the desk.

Yesterday evening, Launay began without preamble, after a discussion lasting five hours by the clock, he had managed to convince the directors of the contracting firms that the wages must be raised. Duly informed, the trade union leaders had decided to call off the stike . . . But this morning the men's leaders had come back with fresh demands, and the directors, furious, had immediately broken off contact.

The best hypothesis to explain the change of atmosphere was this : in the interval these people had learned of the arrival of a forthcoming visit of inspection. All of them were anxious to submit the dispute to Members of Parliament . . . Work on the building projects was to stop today, at noon precisely. There seemed no doubt in anyone's mind that, in the contracts between the Authority and the firms, extremely rigid financial penalties for delay of any kind were provided for in explicit clauses. No doubt it would be left to the Members of Parliament to find some interpretation of the texts that would water them down. Was a strike not a case of *force majeure*?

Launay made a pause. He stared insistently at the models of the future reactors.

"We are here, messieurs, to serve the country. Not to serve sectional interests. In the positions we occupy, only second-raters would wait with folded arms for things to settle themselves. In our thoughts and actions—and if this is not true, so much the worse—we shall behave as if the solution of the dispute depended essentially on us. Is it impossible for us to deny—with any chance of being believed—the forthcoming visit? Very well. We shall try to work with these gentlemen very profitably when they come, but before they arrive we shall not waste a second."

A smile appeared on every face. The masters of Damezan felt so clearly that cohesion was their principal strength.

Launay turned imperturbably to Michel :

"Before we try, all together, to work out detailed measures, would you, *mon cher* Renoir, since for this morning you are, for our purposes, Aubier and Renoir at one and the same time, like to say anything as Aubier's representative?"

"Yes, sir. Very briefly."

Michel leaned back in his chair and, pressing his hands together, thanked Launay for his short exhortation. He was, as were certainly all present, in agreement with every word. He would merely add one specific point. In the wake of the Members of Parliament a geneticist, a certain Thomas-Laborde, would arrive at Damezan. Damezan was not afraid of geneticists. It had appealed to them on more than one occasion for the preparatory work on certain problems. Only Michel was in a position to know that this Thomas-Laborde would descend here with a mind made up in advance. He should be mistrusted, not because he was a geneticist, but because he was Thomas-Laborde, and should not be given full information : there was too much doubt about the way in which he would use his knowledge later. Damezan was not a fair-ground of nuclear attractions for the privileged curious.

With a nod he indicated to Launay he had finished. The Director took up a paper-knife and glanced from one to another of their faces.

"Good. You have heard Aubier . . . I will now question you in turn, and you will each tell me in three minutes how the strike affects your own sector and point of view. After which we will try to put all the views together."

Michel rushed into his office and rang at once for Mme Vauvert. Without even powdering her face, the secretary ran in. It had been an abrupt call, like a drum tap. She found her chief standing, deep in thought. He turned his head.

"Two things I want you to do. Telephone Auteuil 02-33 now and ask for my wife. You will tell her, without any explanation, that I am putting my son in a school nearby and that all correspondence will go through me. At noon you will go over to Nouvil-

largues (I haven't the time) and have lunch with the boy and then, immediately afterwards, take him to the Boussots. You will go back there for him at about 4.30 this afternoon and will take him—the chauffeur will have the address—to a young woman who is a friend of mine, and who has consented to look after his education and upbringing.”

He took off his glasses, wiped them and smiled. Mme Vauvert said nothing. Her face showed emotion.

“I'm relying on your intelligence and discretion,” he murmured. “Please excuse me for bringing you into these affairs.”

“No excuse needed.”

He held out his hand to her.

Wearing their plastic helmets, tied tightly by the leather thongs under their chins, Rouquiès and Michel moved forwards with difficulty, as best they could, against the mistral, leaning forward with bent knees like men towing a barge. Bits of grit, straw and shavings kept striking them on the face and legs. Whirlwinds of dust eddied about. The whole vast countryside seemed whistling. A badly stowed piece of corrugated iron rushed over the ground with a thunderous noise. A lorry that had turned head on to the wind tipped out its five tons of pebbles, a regular landslide. It was as if the primitive forces of the world were trying to show the technicians and their machines that they still possessed impressive powers of violence.

Seven kilometres to the south-east the tall solitary chimney of a plaster works was shaking the white and yellow cord of its capricious smoke in the sky like a whipstock.

Poor sensible realities, continue to impress the weak! From now on, the attention of superior men is turned upon things that cannot be seen or heard or touched. You are no more than a ridiculous stuttering in that mute language of truth and beauty, which the scientist deciphers from the prodigies that, at a signal from him, his mechanisms release . . .

The pile is not working. But it will again, it must. And other, more powerful ones, will one day be working beside it.

Enclosing a space where, eight months earlier, the wind and birds and sun could still think themselves masters, there rose the

walls destined to contain the secret dramas of two nuclear reactors. *A* had had the great honour of being the first pile, but in technical value *B* and *C* were going far beyond it! It was only a chapel: they would be cathedrals! Into the enormous mass of this Amiens and this Chartres of the new energy, the men and women of France would have poured money, materials and men's work in profusion, because the strange cyclones that would run their course within these precincts were destined to guarantee to them their indispensable liberation.

From outside, *B* looked almost finished. *C*'s concrete had only begun to rise; but the dimensions of its foundations, the height of its cranes and scaffoldings, the marvellous mid-air complication of its beams and trellises and, above all, the example of its twin, indicated its future scale . . .

Gasping like young hounds after the hunt, Michel and his companion had stopped. Sheltering their eyes with their hands, they gazed. Already *B*'s pure cliff rose like the shut gate of a citadel forbidden to the profane. Be off with you, sceptics and idly curious people, I know the roads of truth better than you do! And against the dryness of the blue sky the complex anatomy of the other edifice stood outlined like some monstrous harp. They felt proud, for themselves and for Aubier. This, in various degrees, was their work: the time of the pyramid-builders had returned.

They resumed their walk. However closely they looked, there was certainly nothing to show that a strike of indefinite duration was to start in less than two hours. The Hercules now plunging his pneumatic drill into the ground gave all the signs of a superb perseverance with the whole future in front of it. There was no gap in the din of the riveters and welders, hovering over their work with birds-of-prey eyes behind their dark glasses, and the sheaves of blue and yellow sparks which they ceaselessly produced bounced from beam to beam like bullets of fire. A crane was raising into the sky a silvery plate weighing several tons. Another swung a dark red grapple and another a twisting mass of long brown bars. The lorries came and went, filled and emptied.

Rouquiès and Michel advanced, one behind the other, over the plank bridge which led into the belly of *B*. The violence of the mistral was at its maximum. They had to walk heeled over at

forty-five degrees, with their overcoats fluttering behind them like washing, and their ears deafened by the tumult. Things, which might sometimes be bits of metal, were flying through the air. To think that, in spite of all the difficulties of which this enormous draught was the noisy symbol, there had never yet been any hold-up in the building of the machine-monument. What sort of folly was it that would make them today treat the whole of this huge unfinished work, which was on the point of becoming a real work, as a mere sketch?

They had pushed their way up-stream, strenuously, persevering against the siphon of the mistral and, like two men engaged in a race, had made their way into the monument. About them the wind fell, was reduced to small icy flames, and while the flood of blood rose into their faces they made out once more, in detail and in their mass, all the sounds of that aviary. The walls of the reactor nave rose in a single magnificent soaring flight to welcome, high above them, the roof. A smile lit up the faces of the two men. It acknowledged not merely a technical victory but the gaiety that streamed like a pure spring from that mountain of strength. All those grand harmonious proportions commanded happiness, and it became less astonishing to see painters working at ninety feet from the ground without any safety devices, or regular daredevils coming down from the centering arches at full speed, using the beams like a trapeze instead of sticking to the prosaic steps of the iron staircase.

And yet, at noon precisely, this spectacle would cease.

There were no suspicious, whispering clusters. It was some point to do with the work that was being discussed, here and there, by a group gathered around a machine that was not for the moment working, or around a foreman bent over a table to track down some difficulty in the network of a blue-print. Each man knew his job. Behind the glasses of the man now coming their way in wellington boots and tight-fitting blue overalls, the pockets bulging with his metal rule and precision tools, were the eyes those of a man from the Ardèche or a Spaniard? In any case, there was a man who to the end of his days would know he had taken part in the building of *B*— and would be proud of it.

A giant pushed his glasses up over his helmet and slid with a laugh like a boy down one of the pillars. He had sparkling blue

eyes, fair bushy eyebrows and a fair moustache. A Pole, perhaps? Michel wanted to smile at him, but held himself back. No familiarities! It is for the main-stream of history that all this work is being done.

Following Rouquiès, he climbed two flights of the iron staircase. They had reached the outer block of the pile itself, the pure dungeon, the envelope of the absolute centre. The darts of the most subtle of the radiations—those that would escape the blanketing of the graphite rods—must, when the time came, strike against this concrete carapace thicker than a fortress wall, to be turned back to work upon the uranium masses. And so, behind it, the inhuman battles of the particles of matter would again start upon their infinite progress, their lightning violence in suspense—fires and massacres always contained at the last second. The plutonium stock would build up. And simultaneously, from the invisible seething of these millions of collisions, destructions and rebirths, a broad river of subtle electricity would be born, like the strong wine from the pressing of the grapes.

Without a word of consultation Rouquiès and Michel passed through the entrance of the block, leaving all the sounds of the nave outside. And now, to exchange impressions, they were no longer obliged to raise their voices; yet they had no desire to converse and they went different ways, contemplating the walls which closed them in.

They had the warmest esteem for each other. And the walk which had brought them right into the gullet of the monster on this before-strike morning had filled them with emotion. Only, what words could be any use to them? In that artificial cave, which was the natural successor to the prehistoric caverns and their mysteries, they had come out upon the verge of the known world, on the edge of virgin spaces. The sober scent that came from the concrete was the same as that which one breathes above precipices. What did it matter that this machine must remain clamped to the ground without ever being able to leap up like a rocket towards the free stars? The journey to which it would soon be impelling the invisible particles sprung from the uranium rods would also find, in the immeasurable vastnesses described by the infinitesimal elements of matter, its own wild heavens peopled with stars.

And now, with their minds full of the fresh images they needed, they must prepare for this afternoon's discussion. The small room, narrow and rough as a monastic cell, but with blueprints and diagrams on its walls instead of pious pictures, had the right atmosphere for useful decisions. The mistral was drumming on the hut roof.

Rouquiès had sat down at his desk. He had sheets of white paper close at hand.

"Shall we send for Dupraz?" he asked.

Michel shook his head. The main thing was to get a move on. His wrist watch said 11.35 : at two that afternoon they were meeting the principal technicians from the firms working on *B* and *C*. They would have to work out together an alternative programme that would make it possible, by means of additional night shifts and overtime, to regain as much as possible of the time lost. The meeting was bound to be a long and hard one. And yet, immediately after it, they would have to proceed to the meticulous drafting of a report. Launay wanted it for tomorrow, first thing. He would need this technical trump card for the series of conciliation interviews he was determined to arrange as quickly as possible, in agreement with the finance specialists who were due to arrive from 'head office'.

It was good, indeed, to face up to crises in co-operation with Rouquiès or Bousso! Each of them had shown the man he was: they belonged to that band of men whose gaze is sharp, whose will is strong and who do not evade an issue. The same would be said one day, no doubt, of Dupraz—later . . .

From outside, between two gusts came the unreal tinkle of an ambulance bell. Michel screwed up his face :

"My own proposal," he began, ignoring everything except the work, "in accordance with the instructions Aubier has left me, of which I fully approve, would be that *B* should be given the full benefit of our special effort. It's better to have one reactor working, plus another a long way from completion, than to have two reactors officially on the point of being finished, but whose start-up is in practice perpetually delayed. I think there's no need, is there, for me to bore you with the arguments?"

The telephone rang. Rouquiès dropped his pen.

"I thought I said we were to be left in peace!"

It went on ringing. The man picked up the receiver and, almost immediately, his face hardened. He clenched his free fist. He listened carefully. Without distinguishing the words, one could hear that the voice at the other end was sharp and breathless.

"You've done exactly the right thing," said the engineer at last. "A most unfortunate accident. Let Monsieur Launay know. I'll come down."

He hung up.

"A chap's just been killed, over at *B*, he said in a voice he tried to make inexpressive. "Carelessness, of course. He fell forty-five feet . . . And yet we keep telling them, again and again, that they must rope themselves on!"

He stood up and took his lumber-jacket.

"Where are you going?" Michel asked.

"To the infirmary, where they've put the body. You're coming. I suppose?"

Michel narrowed his eyes and replied that he would stay where he was. There would be enough people at the infirmary already. He preferred to stay there and think. The afternoon's meeting was too important.

"As you like," said Rouquiès, with surprise—and perhaps a shade of reproof.

A moment later there came from outside the sound of a car driving off with determination. Michel was alone—but incapable of concentrating on the work programme. The nave of *B* roared and whirled in his head. The blue sparks. The plank paths. The conveyor belt. The gymnastics of the painters . . . What a stupid accident!—and, what was more, one which the strikers would not fail to turn into a weapon.

At seven minutes to twelve Rouquiès returned. He tossed his lumber-jacket on to the peg.

"It's a horrible sight . . ."

He lowered his voice and, as if in parenthesis, added that fortunately the coefficient of serious accidents was still much lower at Damezan than on other important building-sites.

"That's not the question," Michel interrupted loudly. "The job is urgent. It must have priority . . . Suppose we begin by getting back to the reactors?"

"I'm sorry, it *is* part of the question," said Rouquiès.

Michel looked at him open-mouthed, and the other must have realized that he had been bold.

"Do you know the chap's name?" he asked, moving forward.

"I'm not a clairvoyant!"

"Do you remember, when we went into the nave of *B—*?"

Michel's eyes widened. He could hear his heart beating violently. The outline of the man rose in his memory, as clear as a tracing. And that laugh was still in his ears. Cut down like a grass of the field, the fair-haired colossus. Extinguished, the sparkling blue of his eyes, happy from contemplating the world.

"Why did he have to—?" he murmured, and could not finish.

Suddenly there flooded through his veins a warm posthumous friendship for that unknown workman who had also, in his simple-minded fashion, believed in nuclear fission.

Who had believed in the enormous gaiety of the high naves that shelter the reactors!

A siren blast rent the air, the sound rising and falling at the mercy of the mistral. Noon. A few seconds ago the strike had become fact.

"Back to work?" said Rouquiès.

This time the delay was due to his companion who, with his back against one of the walls, was meditating on the man who had just given his life on the Damezan plateau. He, at least, would not desert the work. *He* was not now hastening, along with the sheep-like crowd, towards the dusty buses, as though starting for a holiday. The idiots! They found their comrade's death sad, but it didn't stop them from running away.

"Did the fellow damage his head?" he asked.

The huge Rouquiès was dumbfounded by the question. He said in a whisper that the head had not been touched. He was about to go into details, but Michel had raised his hand.

"I'm with you," he snapped, and his voice was resolute.

ONE-TEN IN THE MORNING. A SMALL CAR COULD BE HEARD driving off. It was the secretary, with eyes heavy with sleepiness, leaving after having finished typing the second draft of the report. Fortunately her fingers had kept their accuracy to the end: Michel and Rouquiès, each re-reading his copy, turned the pages faster and faster. Launay would be pleased.

The night was black, warm and big with rain. There was an African something in the air, a savour of softness and fertility. As though, after the mistral's cleansing work, autumn were beckoning, across winter, to the spring. The two men yawned and stretched. They looked at the deserted, ill-lit building-sites whose resumption of work they were already preparing, and at a small jeep belonging to the Security Police, which was moving slowly away, like a small fly, from near A's fan. Rouquiès said something and abruptly made Michel follow him to his car. Thirty seconds later they had overtaken the jeep. "Could you let us in to the canteen? We haven't had anything to eat for five hours." The blue-helmeted guards laughed. They said there was a refrigerator containing some cold meat and fruit. It was as they said. Rouquiès switched on the light, laid a table and switched them out again: a pocket torch would be enough. The two men sat down facing the windows. On moonlit nights one must be able to see a huge landscape from here, but now all was black as a tomb.

This large restaurant hall—vibrant as a drum-skin at the rush hours—was where the blond colossus must have come so often, while, outside, the struggle of men against the forces of matter awaited him.

Rouquiès' excellent teeth made the bread crackle. He was beginning to enjoy life again, while Michel, no longer sustained by the fever of the job, was revolving gloomy thoughts . . .

The car returned to the shed. To the right, some way away from the main drive, one window in a small building shone, all alone.

"The infirmary," Rouquiès thought aloud.

"Since we're there," Michel murmured, "would you mind driving me over?"

The engineer did so in silence. When they had stopped in front of the white door, lit by a blue bulb, he too got out.

"I'll show you the way," he said, brushing past the night-watchman.

How many times had Michel gone to identify corpses during the war years! Pharmacy smells reached him, surrounded him and drew him on, even stronger than church smells.

"This is it, this little room."

The blue eyes had vanished behind the lids. The huge cheerful head had become the head of a silent philosopher, a pale sage whom nothing could distract. The arms were folded and the hands joined on his chest.

He had not been left to lie alone. Michel counted five people sitting on the benches: three huge fellows (evidently one had to be over six feet high to gain that particular artisan's friendship) who were clearly fellow-workers of his, a young woman in mourning and Boussot with his nose in a missal.

Why isn't the engineer responsible for the working of *A* in his bed? Because the pile isn't working? A bad reason! In the corridor, to which he had withdrawn without a word, Michel began to grumble.

"Boussot will do his work badly tomorrow! Just because the pile isn't working, that doesn't mean there's no pile. When it's working it has to be watched. When it isn't working, one must still watch it and prepare for its restarting . . . With the strike, which will delay the coming into being of *B* and *C* a bit more, it's important to give *A* all the care possible."

Rouquiès didn't answer. But in the car a few moments later, he touched Michel on the arm, just as he was on the point of getting out to take his own car. That strange night, with its smell of sap and its images of death, was a good one for a confidence: in full daylight, even on the telephone, there were certain words one couldn't get out. He wanted, he said, to let Michel know, man to man, how glad he was to see that certain consequences of the accident to the pile had been liquidated. When there are bad

setbacks, even the most level heads grow suspicious. Which doesn't prevent people from seeing straight afterwards.

He had kept the allusion purposely vague, but Michel understood at once. He was furious.

"Who's had the effrontery to talk to you?" he asked, forgetting that he was addressing a colleague who was also a very good friend.

Rouquiès hastened to put things right. "I'm very sorry."

The other opened the door abruptly, but did not yet get out. He already regretted the attitude he had taken. He held out his hand. "Sorry, old chap. And try to forget what people have said."

"O.K., master," said the huge Rouquiès, smiling.

He had gone. He was going back to sleep at Arles, thirty-five kilometres away, although Nouvillargues was only twelve, because he was a good monogamous he-man, full of care for his wife and his nest. He had done the job as a good mathematician, three boys, three girls. The wife who watched over the brood in his absence was a small woman from the Midi with dark hair and eyes, who had kept the freshness and liveliness of a growing girl. Michel had privately nicknamed her 'Madame Breeder'. One would almost think each childbirth renewed her youth.

Michel could not make up his mind to drive off. He had just smoked three cigarettes, one after the other. It was nearly two in the morning.

But how sick the thought of his lonely room at Nouvillargues made him! If he listened to his inner promptings he would rig up a camp bed in his office. Come, come, that wasn't honest: more likely, he would drive off through the countryside to Françoise's house. Wasn't he a normal man of flesh and blood, like Rouquiès? He too had a wife and a son out there . . . To slip stealthily into a dark hall . . . Be away before dawn . . .

He drove off. He merely made for the building of *A*, that first and best of reactors, which he had had the temerity to run down, in thought, that morning. Let a Michel junior compare nuclear reactors simply by the coefficient of power! *A* is not working. But it is still an organism as alive as *B* and *C* can ever become, and the plutonium sticking to all its entrails is as good as any Ameri-

can, Russian, Canadian or British plutonium. As poisonous as you could wish, the slut! And quite ready to fart in your face. Ask Martineau, now getting ready to enter into relations with it, how many sleepless nights it has already caused him!

A few moments later the man stood gazing at the north face of the reactor. Alone, like one of the devout in a church at the hour when the villages are having their meal. He remembered *his* night. When he had almost doubted Damezan and his own future.

But a hand descended on his shoulder. He turned. It was Bousso.

The two friends, with embarrassed smiles, asked each other what they were doing there. Bousso's answer was quite simple: the guard had told him of Michel's arrival.

But Michel spoke harshly. "Let's go up to your office for a moment."

By night Jacques' office had kept its atmosphere: science and frankness.

"Rouquès has just told me something I don't care for. It seems people comment on my reactions when I'm not there to defend myself. From pity, no doubt?"

He did not allow time for an interruption, but went on: "You thought it right to go and keep watch at the infirmary over the poor chap who was killed. I don't understand you: he wasn't one of your chaps and, if I'm not mistaken, prayer has the same effectiveness everywhere."

He stopped and turned away. If one was to make such a reproach, one ought to proceed correctly. He hadn't dared. He knew perfectly well that Bousso was no slacker. He could not help now suspecting himself of having yielded to a petty anti-religious impulse.

Fortunately his friend had been so taken by surprise that he had preferred to make no answer.

"Right," Michel resumed. "And now I must speak officially. As the perspicacious Launay has said, I'm both Aubier and Renoir just now. This two-headed technician urges you to be on your guard, in a few days' time."

He lowered his voice.

"You'll remember, a geneticist is to be sent to us by the powers

that be, and it'll be your job to put him in the picture—or seem to! Let's suppose he gets to know of the accident to the pile. He would refuse to admit it was a regular occurrence, like a tyre-burst or the breaking of a mast, and would rush off in search of stories of neutrons gone mad and catastrophes only just avoided, which might do us the greatest harm."

There followed a silence. Boussot reflected.

"I should have thought," he said at length, "that if the man was honest, two ounces of scientific spirit would have been enough to rid him of any desire to . . . upset us? Geneticists can be very good sorts."

Michel glanced towards the window. The night of the accident was still weighing on the back of his neck.

"I think I gave you some details, in this very room. Try to remember. I told you that, if my wife became free——"

Boussot raised his hand. He had not forgotten, there was no need to go on.

When the two friends were again outside in the night, it had begun to rain. It was still only a drizzle—the earth smelt of ploughed field and cattle shed, but through the deep darkness one could guess at the heavy molecules of the clouds gathering together and piling up.

Up above them, the lights^d of A's chimney shone like a huge yellow necklace.

Almost flush with the ground, the window of the infirmary must still be shining in its secluded corner, vigilant and peaceful. Deceptive, too, like the torch of a wrecker.

Dawn sadness dripping slowly from the sackcloth of the great blackish clouds. A coal-dark thrush swooping to earth, then strutting in a dazed silence through the bushes ruffled by the driving rain.

The blond colossus, as he jumped from his bed and pressed his face to the window, would have hated this countryside.

Michel plunged under the shower. Rub yourself hard, you poor specimen, and forget nature and climate, those ridiculous distractions reserved for poets. When you turn a switch you resuscitate the genius of physicists now dead, from the beginning of history. The souls of Becquerel and Volta rise about you in the warm steam. You hold out your fist and Einstein rushes to perch on it.

But the man had no taste, either, for the nonsense inspired by the joy of living. One must prepare for the battles ahead.

And to begin with, let's have done with the thought which has been pricking this brain all through the short night.

Wrapped in his bathrobe, Michel sat on the edge of his bed and rang up Martineau.

For nearly an hour André Thomas-Laborde had been striding up and down his room, his hands behind his back, and still his anger had not died down. To have wasted two years' research! Incapable, into the bargain, of discerning the source of the error. A sham scientist, just good enough to give lectures to fashionable audiences.

His chief—a foregone conclusion—would try to console him. 'Hasn't anyone ever told you that the setbacks—"avatars"—are the essential links of science? Bear up, old man. A setback borne with patience valorizes' (he had such a love for that ridiculous word!) 'and matures a man. When you have tracked down—and you will!—the defect in your reasoning and the unsatisfactory experiments that are the cause of the trouble, you will soon see that, after all, not a single thing you did has been useless . . . Two years wasted? A pernicious expression, and quite untrue! Two years gained! For you—and not only for you—for science.'

That damned word 'science', with the dreadful sibilance of its first syllable, and as pretentious as a hangman—to hell with it!

Pasteur himself went wrong, more than once. So did Einstein. And Mendel. And Fermi. And Michurin. A hundred others, a thousand others! All of them. And some of their errors, when one examines them, seem incredible. One would think they'd committed them on purpose, like children in a rage. And yet they're still models of dazzling genius—just as, it seems, certain prose authors and poets are, who in their off moments were responsible for pages and pages of tommy-rot.

André felt a tear on his cheek. Astonished and ashamed, he stopped in front of a looking-glass—the same one in which, two days ago, Juliette had looked at herself. Face to face with that extraordinary face of his, he could not help smiling. He looked

like a rain-soaked duck. In a flash he remembered two friends of his, who had come back from their years spent in Indo-China with their skins yellow and their cheeks hieratic : had he perhaps been carrying out the laws of a similar mimicry? It was lucky, wasn't it, that he did look like a duck, rather than like the other animal with which he had been co-operating—a frog?

Anger seized him again : here he was posing as a dilettante after venturing to compare himself with Fermi, Pasteur and Michurin. How easy, when there was nobody by to contradict !

The man had begun his maniac pacing once more. The telephone rang, he let it ring. Science, science, science . . . Let her find someone else to tumble her, the insatiable whore—he was too old !

There was the tinkle of china and the rustle of a skirt behind him. Bernadette, the rationalist, with her eyes lowered like a nun, had brought, unasked for and in silence, a second breakfast.

“Put it down in the drawing-room,” he muttered.

And docilely, thirty seconds later, he sat down in front of the food. The old servant's large heart moved him : she was like some experiment forgotten in a corner of the laboratory and succeeding all by itself, a gentle, discreet flowering . . . When the telephone rang again he rose without irritation and went to answer it.

It was Juliette. She could not have chosen a worse moment.

And yet he knew he had just been thinking of her. Was it not the eternal instinct of women to console, that showed in Bernadette's good primitive solicitude? And for him the idea of womanhood had for so long been represented by Juliette. This time their moral relationship seemed to have been turned the other way round. Juliette's jerky voice, clumsy expressions and nervous laughs showed that she was suffering and in search of help. Michel, she said, had done an odious thing : he had had his secretary ring her up : the boy was going as a boarder—at his age! —into a school whose name they would not give her. All letters must go through Michel. Behind the words, all the time, André thought he could hear ‘Come quickly !’. Only he was careful not to suggest a meeting. Yes, yes, when he was at Damezan he would

obtain the address of the school by hook or by crook. Yes, yes, he would deliver into the child's own hands a letter from his mother. All this was what friendship demanded—was there anything more? He had so much work on hand. Juliette would send him the letter by post.

"Think, André, *we* might have had a son!"

Since she asked him, he did think of it; he thought also that they had not had one.

When he had hung up the receiver he lit a cigarette (the first of the day, the tangible sign that he was coming to the surface), then opened the french windows and went out on to the terrace. The sunshine was caressing the yews and larches. At the bottom of the garden there rose the blue smoke from the laboratory in which, during the night, in the presence of the monsters born of his stupidity, he had experienced that sudden despair which he no longer regretted. Michel's face came into his mind. After all that Juliette had just said, he ought to have hated him, or at least despised him, but he felt he could not; and a pure and strong brotherly feeling for the atom scientist arose in him. Had they not, though in disciplines that were different if not resolutely hostile, both of them been led to become representatives of one and the same type of man—the seeker, the man who forgets himself, the determined defender of the primacy of the real? There was nothing to be surprised at in the fact that they had loved the same woman and, having loved her, moved away from her one day, as from a screen between them and the forces of the world.

Science—the word no longer whistled, it flowed like a clear spring, revealing its miraculous sweetness—like German adjectives, which might have seemed very harsh, in the middle of a love song.

Suddenly, from the top of a tree, came the trilling of a bird. A motif of happiness, definite and light, to the glory of the sun! André threw away his cigarette and went back into the drawing-room to which, unheard by him, Bernadette had already brought the post. After the lamentable failure of his experiments he could allow himself some leisure, and so, contrary to his habit, he unfolded the newspapers. '*Strike at Damezan Building-Sites*' flashed the cruel headline, followed by a few lines of text. Several

thousand workers leaving the sites. A wage dispute. Delays to be feared in the completion of building B.

To think that Juliette the Parisienne, who received the newspapers earlier than he did, had managed to telephone to him for ten minutes on end, and about Damezan too, without a single mention of the strike! Apparently she was unaware of it. When she read a paper her eyes, indifferent to serious news, reacted, no doubt, only to the fashion page and the news of fashionable events. A strike of several thousand men and the terrible worries of the staff responsible, to which her husband belonged—these were invisible trifles. Poor old Michel!

The geneticist, as he went on reading, still heard the trill of the bird, but in his mind a parallel was establishing itself, with an odd strength, between his worries and those of the atom scientist. One doesn't hit an enemy when he's down. Therefore he would not go to Damezan, in spite of the great desire he had had to do so . . . And still had. On the sixth page of the newspaper the eyes accustomed to playing with microbes and genes caught sight of an item in quite small print: the lowering of the official threshold of radioactivity considered as dangerous for human beings. An initiate like him might well find in this simply the confirmation of a semi-official decision of several months ago. None the less the announcement of it by the newspapers, those town criers of modern times, emphasized that the atomic age was no longer merely beginning. The radioactivity danger was taking its place in daily life just like, in former times, the danger of the Barbarians or the danger of the famished wolf-packs. Hiroshima and Nagasaki could no longer claim to be merely tragic exceptions.

He closed his eyes and again lived through the Stockholm exercises. He felt as if, above the colossal doors of the underground shelter, he could see quivering in electric letters the phrase: 'Abandon hope, all ye who do not enter here.'

Am I going to let myself become once more a man who can never make up his mind? he asked himself. My scientific failures are just part of the game. In any case I must manage to profit by them. It is simple, I must not relax.

He stretched himself and suddenly stood up. He made for the telephone.

Was it inevitable that a scientist should be unable to move a woman without exposing himself to cruel failures?

He was willing to try again. If he failed, he would conclude that nothing had changed.

The invisible bird continued the praises of light and of the world.

Part III

I

MICHEL GOT OUT OF HIS CAR. A SHUDDER WENT THROUGH HIS shoulders. Always that damned draught, he thought.

There was more than that. Through the curtain of driving rain he saw in front of him, two hundred yards away, the building-sites abandoned by the workers, like the remains of enormous caissons condemned to demolition. There was nothing in common—the mind could feel it—between this spectacle and Damezan on a Sunday. It was the cruel symbol of a lost chance.

The man shivered again. I'm going off my rocker, he thought. In two years I've taken a fortnight's holiday. It wasn't enough. He was astonished to notice for the first time, with the clarity of a discovery, a contradiction between the proud plateau, loaded with the creations of modern science, and the muddy grey rain, that remnant of prehistory. Warning to the engineers of the future : to contrive somehow not to tolerate at Damezan any weather but sunshine and mistral. Even if the internal violence of the machine-monuments knew nothing of the stupid drops battering on the roof, it was regrettable that the buildings should have such a morose appearance outside. A matter of principle, like the necessity of youth in all the leaders of the nuclear world.

Meanwhile it was raining.

"Well?"

Michel, the evening before, had scarcely had a chance to have a passing word with his secretary. And then only on service matters. The conversation had better be got in at once.

Mme Vauvert had come in a summer frock under her rain-coat. He noted this. He was glad of it. Here was a young woman who had understood Damezan.

She said quickly that Mme Renoir, yesterday evening, had been out. A certain Louise had answered and said she would pass on the message. As for Michel junior . . . But already the telephone

was ringing. The man flung up his arms and signed to her to switch it through to his office.

No, it was not Launay.

It was Aubier, ringing up from the île-de-France. He announced straight-away that three men from Saclay—Genaille, Warzyck and Laroche—would be arriving in Arles that very evening. He had instructed them to work out with Boussot and Renoir (Renoir would take the chair) various measures to do with the pile. If *A* was to be got working again, it seemed clear, having regard to the laboratory experiments and also to the prudence of those right at the top, that they would be led to reduce its power. From 38 to 36. In a proportion considerably larger than this, the speed of the plutonium production would be reduced. Of course Martineau had made a fuss; but the dear man had too sensitive a feeling for realities, and also too much loyalty, not to accept a decision that was wise: as long as it was not clearly known at what temperature a magnesium can had caught fire, they had no right to run certain risks.

There was silence. The two men were thinking of Windscale.

"If you think you really can't do without me," Aubier resumed, "I will come down at once, but I'm doing good work just now. I'm initiating myself more deeply into the worries of Martineau and his people. We're looking, together, for the alloy to be used in *B* or *C*—or *D* or *E*—if they're to enrich our uranium by means of plutonium from *A*. It's fascinating, our *bouillabaisse* of nucleii. The be-bop and the cha-cha-cha look like children's ring-a-ring-a-roses in comparison."

"Quite," answered Michel. He realized the expression was not a very good one; but a word had to be found for his strong feeling that this was all in the day's work. There was nothing lawless about these processes in which matter was broken up.

"In any case," said Aubier, "I'll ring again. Do a good job, you two and the chaps from Saclay."

Michel had hung up. The telephone rang again immediately, jerkily like a jack-in-the-box.

Mme Vauvert, untroubled by coincidence, announced in an official voice: "Monsieur Renoir, I'm putting through Monsieur Launay."

It must mean that our yesterday's report hasn't made the

grade, Michel thought bitterly. *M. le Directeur* is going to show me yet another way of indicating to a colleague, indirectly, that one isn't pleased with him.

"Renoir? Have you a moment? I should like your advice. On a matter outside your normal functions."

After a pause for recovery, Michel began weakly: "I have . . ."

He did not get further. Launay had interrupted with a royal: "Now in my office." Then a muffled sound. There was no longer anyone at the other end.

Michel was making for the door when the telephone rang again. He went quickly out.

André stopped his car in the deserted square of the little village.

"Shall we have lunch here?"

It was almost the first thing he had said since they had left. He had driven very fast, a thing he never did, so anxious was he to arrive at the destination—a solid, sensual region, Burgundy.

Christiane, unstiffening her arms, nodded approval. The church clock was striking one. A cock crew, and was answered by another far down the valley, in a neighbouring village. From the hill on the right to the hill on the left the pure sky stretched like the great flat stone of a cromlech.

A real country restaurant, with a rickety billiard table, pictures of the 'Angelus' and the 'Night of August 4th', a boar's head, a hunting-horn and, stuck to the looking-glass above the bar, a list of the fairs and markets in the neighbourhood. The whole family was still at table in one corner; the children, with napkins tied round their necks, were devouring bread and jam.

A sturdy woman with a triangular face rose to her feet, and so did a large black dog of uncertain breed.

"*Messieurs-dames*, did you want lunch, or refreshments?"

"We'd like *lunch*," André answered, stressing the ritual word more than he meant to. "Whatever's going," he added. "We're not fussy."

"Very good, *messieurs-dames*. I'll bring serviettes."

Instead of following her, the black dog slumped down heavily on the floor, watching the couple with his good, curious eyes. The young woman stroked him. He growled with pleasure and set in

motion the mechanism of his tail, banging the stone floor as if with a stick.

André considered the soot-blackened ceiling and the damp patches on the walls :

"I feel very stingy, bringing you here," he said in a low voice.

She moved her finger to indicate dissent and smiled, and went on smiling. She felt happy. She was no Marie Chantal, but a poor girl who had been born at Port Said, brought up at Lima and then at Los Angeles, with the blood of five or six nations in her veins, and a longing to anchor somewhere at last. André knew nothing of this. But an instinctive sympathy was rising between them, as if, to get to this small inn, they had each had to pass through the many turnings and dangers of some extraordinary journey. The room was full of a heavy, dreamy calm. The low undulating country they had seen that morning and the wild mountains which would soon swing past them were waiting outside, like a patient collection of large farm animals tied up to the rings on the walls of the house.

André had ordered some of the local wine. But the whole earth seemed contained in the opaque, dusty bottle.

It was with a Burgundy that they had celebrated, at Dr Laffon's, their first coming together.

On the evening before, Christiane had dined with her Aunt Chayriguès, in the company of Greek arms-merchants and Swiss bankers and a thoroughly Parisian individual, M. François Legrest, an art critic as bald as an egg. It was impossible to see why this man had never created any works of high quality : no name of a living or dead artist could be mentioned in front of him without his flourishing a final 'Bad !' or 'Very bad !' like a sword in one's face. After dinner he had attached himself to her. Mme Chayriguès in her cruel wiliness encouraged this : to prevent her niece from committing any serious blunders later on, she wished to make her disgusted with men. The two chairs had been close together, and the old man with uneasy eyes had gone on and on staring at her and covering her with lecherous and banal compliments in the intervals of executing painters by the dozen.

"You may have thought, on the telephone," she said to André, "that I was accepting your proposal for this excursion too easily,

like a silly girl on the look-out for an affair or a husband at all costs. Actually I needed to wash myself clean from that evening. You seemed like a saviour."

"A saviour who drives at an average of eighty miles per hour! I won't do it again," André stammered, swallowing a mouthful of wine. The harshness of the winter soil rose within him and great landscapes came into the room. Between those dull walls, which seemed to support a calm horizon, he saw Christiane standing out against a background of sloping fields and great dark woods.

Suddenly a whistle brought the outside world to life again. It had come from the small square. As though by enchantment, laughter and galloping feet sprang into being. Boys, girls and playing dogs. The innkeeper's children had grabbed up satchels and coats and were rushing to the door, ignoring the distinguished strangers. It was the moment when the whole of the noisiest part of the village population must go back to school, to stuff itself with knowledge and doubt. The black dog, who knew how much the time he lived in demanded education, and was glad for his young masters' sakes, smote the floor with three sententious blows of his tail.

André lifted the curtain at the window. He wanted to get a better view of the children and, above all, to prevent the girl, for a moment more, from reading his face. She was so serenely happy, he could feel. A passage from Thomas Mann came into his mind—Rachel's bold murmur to Jacob: 'I should like to have a child by you.'

"No need to make excuses, Christiane," he said without turning his head. "When I rang you up, I too was going through a crisis of despair . . . Forgive me; in putting that question to you I was questioning existence."

"And what did she answer?"

"That there were cases much worse than mine."

He dared not let the curtain fall back, but already Christiane had burst out laughing:

"I like that answer. May I apply it to myself too?"

André turned:

"Meaning what?"

She laughed again.

"For a scientist, you haven't much intuition! Look me in the eyes and you'll understand."

He obeyed. There was no deceit there.

"Perhaps you don't know that I've been divorced?" he asked.

She looked at him with a mocking, disabused expression.

"Do you take me for a white columbine?"

"And will you never have any regrets?"

"Never."

A marvellous moment of silence filled the room, while the final gallop of children passed beneath the windows. The black dog had felt that something was happening and demanded some solemn reaction. It got up and placed its huge hard head like an offering on the man's thigh. Perhaps it wished to convey that it too was happy.

The school-bell rang and rang, telling of the resumption of its tournaments, the pranks of orthography and the beauty of rectangles.

Wouldn't it be wiser, André was thinking, to take Christiane back to Paris at once and return to Ermenonville? They would come back to the landscapes of Burgundy soon, with more time to spare.

He savoured the bouquet of his wine, and it seemed to him that he was breathing in all the vigour and kindness of the earth and its vegetation, that divine flesh of the world which was as necessary to man as the umbilical cord to an embryo. He would never again yield to weakness. The task opening before him was so fine and so great.

"Would you be prepared, in a few days' time, to go with me as far as Damezan?"

"What can we try now?"

The Director's voice was strong and vibrant, and yet Michel shivered. There was a hint of perplexity in it, something like a bad electric contact. He had never noticed that before, not even on the night when the rod flared up. It was as though, for the first time, Launay, that solid oak, was betraying fatigue.

Michel did not answer, but plunged again into the file. His eyes grew misty, and he had to blink. Now that the great man

had shown a sign of weakness, the presence of the Director was embarrassing.

How could one dare reproach him for it? A strong man should have to struggle only against his equals. Or against the cosmic intelligence. Never against the stupidity of the crowd, in which the great Launay was today floundering.

A young workman has paid with his life for a professional imprudence. A high price, certainly; but science demands that one should not play about with the hardness of the real. Not to mention that for any man to die on one of the Damezan building-sites constitutes an honourable end. The blond colossus, if he had been given the choice of his death, would not have hesitated. Certainly not.

That is how a right-minded person argues; but—and this is part of reality, and therefore must also be admitted—the general public does not follow suit. To the whole of the local press this morning the rash colossus has become a victim of a system . . . The idiots!

'Certainly the material conditions of the work at Damezan, apart from the question of wages (see under the heading "Strikes"), seem, on the surface, in no way open to exception, and, as far as is known, our Regional Inspectors have never had cause to intervene; but it is important to stress that the evidently somewhat mysterious nature of the buildings in course of construction and the treacherousness of the danger of radioactivity produce a special atmosphere of nervousness among the workers. Assurances have been given, from high quarters, that the utmost attention is paid to every detail; that a worker has nothing to fear except the risks that come from his own clumsiness, or from that of one of his fellows . . . So many assurances are given from high quarters! After the death of our valued comrade it is right that a solemn cry of alarm should go up: what happens on the Damezan plateau is not all plain sailing, and one would like to know more about it,' etc.

Michel's eyes grew hazy again.

"The old psychosis is getting the upper hand once once," he muttered.

Launay clawed the table with his right hand and pressed so hard that the nails hurt.

"It is a pleasure, though a sad one, to hear you say that. You and I are of the same opinion. The others whom I consulted before you merely spoke of blackmail—in which, indeed, they thought the directors of the firms had a hand : a State organization can jolly well fork out !"

The last expression sounded odd. It represented the greatest concession such a speaker could make to casual language.

"I'm convinced that there is blackmail," Michel answered. "Only, it's exploiting the perpetual fear there is in men, which they cover up with various masks. The novelty of our work supplies an excellent pretext."

The long El Greco face darkened. The Director stood up and went over to the window.

"What is fear?" he whispered, looking out at the rain-soaked countryside. He seemed to be talking to himself. "Are we, the nuclear-energy men, really free from its influence? Isn't there, at the very base of our effort, the essential dread of seeing the other sources of energy soon dry up? Isn't living in the future—as we try at every moment to do by prolonging the curves of statistics—the proof of a secret terror? Isn't progress founded on mistrust?"

Michel in his turn instinctively stood up, as if in obedience to a stage direction.

"Naturally," he said in firm tones, "there's a belt of shadow between us and every great hope, and again on the other side of it. But the eternal fear I was referring to can't be reconciled with any hope : it's the old stupid fear of catastrophes, of plagues, of wars, of railway tunnels, of vaccination, of I don't know what else . . ."

He did know, very well, and he turned away. He had been thinking of the fear of marriage, the fear of the couple . . .

M. Launay calmly—but having perhaps guessed his thought and moved further on—looked at the other man with a kind of superior smile. Forgotten, now, their half-defeatist words. The digression was at an end. It would have played a useful part by stimulating the mind and precipitating the play of the unconscious.

In a few words the Director of Damezan explained what he had in mind. Were those Members of Parliament coming? It was the best thing that could happen. They would be asked to settle the wages question. That and nothing else. For the fear of radio-activity could be treated as a local phenomenon falling into the well-defined sphere of the head of the regional Health Services—a man who must be contacted at once.

There was a moment's silence. Michel was thinking of the pile.

"We know that Dr Lavigne is a conscientious and capable man," said Launay, "but we will get more information about him. If he possesses the necessary breadth of mind and discretion I shall not hesitate—I shall treat him as a friend. Officially, for that matter, we shall not conceal the fact that we are asking him to intervene. The Members of Parliament will be shown this morning's ridiculous articles. We shall tell them that it is because of them we have stopped the pile."

I took that line with Mme Vauvert on one occasion, Michel remembered. And he felt delighted with this interview.

Launay was already walking over to his desk to transform his various decisions into telephone calls.

But the telephone had rung first. Launay calmly took up the receiver.

"It is from the guardroom," he muttered after a moment. "A young woman who wants to speak to you, Renoir. Mademoiselle . . . I can't hear——"

Michel frowned and threw his head back, as though he had no idea what woman could have the cheek to pursue him to Damezan—but in himself he already knew. What did Françoise think she was doing here this morning, among these men? They loved each other, so what? At this moment his need was to get away from her: away with all external demands! On this high peak, whose fierce air suited only selected human beings, there was no room to spare.

He closed his eyes. His own roughness was distasteful to him.

. . . Mademoiselle Romieu . . . You can take it here," said Launay, betraying impatience none the less by a slight tremor of the lips.

Michel made a gesture of refusal.

"No, *Monsieur le Directeur* don't bother. It would be kind if

you would ask the guards to tell her to ring me back in an hour's time."

And suppose, by any chance, Michel junior had fallen ill? A pile goes wrong, why not a child's body? But the scientific probabilities were against that. The troubles had reached their ceiling and seemed to be beginning very slowly to decrease.

And yet, surely a visit by that sensible woman on a morning of driving rain must have some meaning?

The abandonment of their work by thousands of saboteurs had also a meaning; so had all these ignominies that were undermining the great Work, and that whole great assault of technical difficulties. When the others faltered, the lords of Damezan continued to face the enemy. *Etiamsi omnes, ego non*. A small number of men, fortified in the central keep of their work, would bear witness until the end.

2

HOW LONG HAD SHE BEEN WAITING THERE? HE COMPARED HIS watch with the church clock: he was not late. So he need not make excuses. He should ask *her* for them, rather. A woman who telephones the Centre on a working morning has something to answer for! At the first glance he knew she would not protest. Even at a distance her attitude conveyed something of the resignation of a fisherman's wife.

It was no longer raining. The wintry little village, traversed only yesterday at that hour by the stream of powerful yellow and blue buses numbered like runners, which served the Centre, seemed to have collapsed in on itself. Not even a motor-cycle could be heard. The strike had practically killed the traffic between Nouvillargues and Damezan, restoring silence and solitude. A window opened just long enough to allow an invisible old woman to empty out some soapy water (there was a person who had no suspicion of how the problem of waste-disposal tormented certain scientists) and closed again; then a calm like that of lofts where nobody ever goes fell once more upon the depressing square and the grey houses.

At least, as there are no witnesses, there'll be no gossip about our meeting, Michel thought.

Françoise rose from her small green chair and held out her hand. He sat down facing her. A strip of calico nailed to the wall announced : *'Snack bar with television set, open in three days' time.'*

Straight to the point. It was 12.42, and he must be through by 1.5.

"My son's not ill?"

Her smile was most discreetly sardonic. She replied that all was well on that front.

"Do you think me very boorish not to ask how *you* are?" he went on sulkily.

Françoise tried to escape replying. In vain. In the end she said that she did perhaps find his ways odd, but that it wasn't worth mentioning : she had too much respect for a man of his quality, and realized that he couldn't be like everyone else.

"Thank you . . . Would you like a slice of ham or an omelette? I have terribly little time."

She laughed and, this time at once explained why: that, coming from Michel, the concrete words acquired a funny taste; the humble and familiar omelette had become a solemn entity like the result of some discovery before other scientists have authenticated it.

He bit his lip.

"I still don't know why you've come."

For quite a while she could say nothing; she was embarrassed at discovering how much she had enjoyed the fantasy of those first few moments. She was wasting the time of an exceptional man. At a distance she had not realized how difficult it would be to say what she had to say.

"I wanted to consult you about something rather worrying, which has to do with Michel. The strike is exciting the local people. It's an extraordinary event. Perhaps you haven't had time to think of that?"

The man had lit a cigarette. He was listening attentively though very calmly, with his heart full of joy, to these sentences which were meant to disturb him. Françoise was putting him back into the element where he belonged. How different a woman from the fashionable Juliette!

Well, that morning before dawn a neighbour had come to see Françoise, an old peasant whose name was Ludovic Maurier, an obstinate, original, decent fellow who helped her and her priest in their archaeological forays. In fact a friend.

"So you've gone over to the men of the bomb?" he had asked.

When she had defended Damezan against the charge of working for military ends, he had gone up in smoke. He said he knew the workers' wages were to be raised again : "Do you think a chap gets paid 250 francs an hour for messing about with plaster or lifting iron bars (when there's a crane ready to do all the work) if there's not some dirty business to be kept hidden? You're betraying the countryside and its best people, Mademoiselle Françoise, and you may regret it!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing, as yet, but a warning's a warning. If I were you I should get rid of that boy you've just taken on and whose father is——"

The young woman stopped. She blushed. She was thinking she had already gone too far.

"Whose father is . . ." Michel took her up, implacably. And as she still said nothing :

"You must tell me everything," he said. "With scientific exactitude."

She lowered her eyes.

"—one of these poisoners of the beautiful earth God made."

He whistled ironically. That was a bit of rhetoric if ever there was one ! She dared not look at him—as if afraid he would discover in her eyes that she had not said the most difficult thing, which was : "—unless you have certain reasons for taking an interest in the child . . ." Old Ludovic, that decent farmer, must indeed have been upset to make so viperish a remark.

Michel, who had stuck out his lower jaw defiantly, felt a bitter taste in his mouth. 'Poisoner'—he knew the refrain. Far from being annoyed with Françoise, he felt really grateful to her: to a noble soul it costs something to report nonsense.

Nonsense?

He narrowed his eyes behind the big glasses and, in his mind's eye, saw again the morning's meeting in the Director's office. Launay had informed the 'brains' of the diminution in power

which would no doubt be imposed on the pile. This was not yet a final measure, and officially it was only a precaution, taken in cold blood in virtue of an extremely objective piece of reasoning; but why should they deceive themselves? At Damezan one practised the principle: 'always think, never talk.' Whether they liked it or not, those responsible had been influenced by the feeling that a catastrophe did not belong to the domain of the impossible.

Had there not been some poisoning at Windscale? Did not those maladies of the grass and milk detected in the surrounding countryside remind one of the ten plagues of Egypt? Human weakness had passed into the nuclear reactors designed to make up for it.

The thoughts in Michel's mind were whirling round and absent-mindedly he drank a glass of water. There could not be any question of giving in to the peasants. One must simply redouble the precautions, even though it was hard to see what that meant in practice. *A*—and even, on a certain plane, the unfinished *B* and *C*—were out of date. The complete truth would emerge, if not from *D* or *E*, then perhaps from *F* and *G*, the reactors he still hoped to be put in charge of, which for the moment existed only in certain heads.

"What are you thinking about?" Françoise murmured. "I hope I haven't upset you."

"It would take more than that," he said, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes. "Tell me frankly what you're leading up to. You don't now want to keep my son?"

"How wrong you are!"

She had taken his hand. With his red and wandering eyes he looked as if he were begging for help; but she, seeing him like that, felt ready for any sacrifice. She spoke slowly. She knew, she said, that the country people wouldn't attack a child. But would it not be better, all the same, to come to an understanding with them? It had occurred to her that Michel might meet Ludovic. After all, was not he part of reality?

It was one by the clock in the little café, one minute past one by his wrist watch. Michel decided that the wrist watch was wrong.

"Do you see no sign," he asked, "of an ulterior motive behind the man's feelings? Hasn't the old man perhaps wanted to sell his

land? Haven't the huge sums which the expropriated landowners got out of Damezan made him jealous? What's called a human conscience isn't a pretty thing."

"Be quiet . . ."

Ludovic, she said, wasn't a man governed by interest. He had had in his employment, not long ago, a young labourer, a naturalized Spaniard, who had slipped off, one fine morning, to the Damezan building sites and their high wages. He hadn't been able to find a replacement. Also his son, on whom he was relying to take over his land, had gone to Damezan as a guard and had taken wife and children to live in one of the Nouvillargues flats.

Two minutes past one by the clock. Michel, now in possession of all the facts, said he would do as she asked. That same day, if possible. What about seven o'clock, that evening, at Françoise's house? But she pointed out that a peasant would be more malleable if one went to see him in his own house, and Michel thought she was right. He took note of where it was.

He stood up. Awkwardly he took from his pocket a long blue envelope, a letter from Juliette for Michel junior.

"Could you give . . . this to my son?"

Françoise winced, hardly perceptibly.

"Yes, of course."

As she lowered her hand to the letter he held out their eyes met and they realized that they had become much closer to each other. Their fingers almost touched. The foreign paper, which one of them was not yet ready to give up and the other not yet ready to take, transformed itself into a pact of union. A scent rose from the captive letter as a subtle sign that a past was being abandoned.

The rain had begun again, straight and tnick. Was the sadness of summer resorts when one sees them out of season going to establish itself permanently on the plateau, now being flooded by the dark sky, which seemed to crumple the bright colours of the solemn buildings like old rags? Matter and climate had joined with the idleness of the workers, those outsiders, in mocking the foibles of the scientific élite. If the marvellous mildews of plutonium already secreted by the pile on the peripheries of its rods were not scattering, how they must be laughing! The men of Damezan, in their inability to manipulate, or even to get built, their machine

prodigies, were like circus artists overcome by nerves in the middle of a turn, faltering up there before the eyes of an indifferent public.

Covered with mud from its wild drive from the town, Dr Lavigne's small Renault had taken its place behind the Director's large car. Through a window of the office building vague forms could be seen in profile: Trade union representatives and journalists conversing in the hall while awaiting their turn. *A* on one side, *B* and *C* on the other, and General Launay giving battle on two fronts. Circumstances dictate. The great chess-players play twenty or thirty matches at a time.

Michel sat up straight behind his steering-wheel. In the end he had had no lunch, but he would not allow himself the right to feel hungry. Without thinking he released the Vedette's brake and then, noticing he had done so, drove off. Accompanied by the purring of his screenwiper, that poor substitute for the din of the reactor's fan, he started towards the pile. If, as the technicians said, some sickness natural to youth must be invoked to excuse *A*'s aberrations, then it must be a case of fatty anaemia—so strong was the suggestion of deceptive strength that came from the block in its complete silence, glistening with newness in spite of its grey colour. It wasn't working, for all that. It was merely an enormous inert mass of uranium, magnesium, graphite and concrete, furrowed with air and water pipes and electrical circuits. Completely incapable, in its monstrous obesity, of producing the slight regular effort asked of it by its creators. Certainly the transmutations which it carried out in the secrecy of its entrails, when it was working, were prodigious; but after all, should not prodigy be common coin in the world of invisible material particles, as soon—at least—as the mind gave it its attention?

There was danger, in front of that mass, that one might fall to thinking that, for once, animal life and even geneticists could claim a victory. The first people to see it had compared the pile to a hive: was not a queen bee, if one saw things in proportion, a more fertile source of energy? Yet she secreted no plutonium; and twenty pounds of that metal would have been enough to empty the whole earth of all its hives and of a certain number of other things as well.

Michel went quickly out into the white corridor and made for Jacques' office.

"Oh, it's you?"

The engineer of the pile seemed surprised. If not embarrassed. Or annoyed. Yet what could be more normal than this visit?

"Am I disturbing you?"

"Come off it!"

Boussot still looked grave, none the less. He turned away towards the window. Did he know that Michel had been with Françoise half an hour earlier? That didn't concern him. And anyhow, how could he have known?

"I've a service to ask of you, in the name of the Service."

"Fire away."

"Could you meet the three chaps from Saclay at the station this evening? I would join you here. Between Arles and the Centre you can already discuss quite a lot of things."

"The mission will be carried out."

Boussot smiled. That man, as soon as he was asked to do anything . . .

A secretary came in, with a letter for him to read over and sign.

As his friend moved to the other end of the room, Michel absent-mindedly walked over to the desk, which was covered with files. Suddenly an object hit him in the eye: the red tassel, the gilt edge—a missal. He recoiled as if he had been burnt. No, it was not he who was intruding: what was really scandalous was to be the engineer of *A* and, instead of working, mill over these idiocies! Could the rain soften people's characters to this extent? Catholic or not, a man of Damezan could not be a wet! Even if a bad situation were becoming worse and led one to despair, a human being had other resources than a mumbling of prayers!

With his head thrown back and his face scowling, he made for the door and went out without a word of explanation.

At the very instant when he came into his office, the telephone rang. As though he had set an alarm going. He made a face. And yet a reckoning of the probabilities showed at once that such coincidences were bound to happen.

"Hallo?"

Contrary to habit, he felt glad when he recognized Launay's voice. He had been afraid it might be Françoise, ringing up to put him off.

Dr Lavigne had just left the Director. In the highest sense of the word he was a man. With a scrupulousness worthy of Damezan he showed respect for difficult problems and for the specialists appointed to deal with them. With a few reserves, he could answer for all the mayors and all the priests in the district, and for the great majority of the schoolteachers. In the long run, he had said, the Damezan Centre would implant itself firmly in the psychological bedrock of the countryside. For the moment, care must be taken not to put too much strain on public opinion. But also not to let it worry them too much.

Michel thanked Launay for letting him know so quickly. Should he, in turn, mention the meeting he was to have that evening, which had its place in the same order of problems? The Director had already rung off.

The flush of good humour was already over. Face to face with all the problems now in suspense, Michel was again all alone. And one had to bear, on top of that, a lugubrious sky, worthy of the men of Cro-Magnon or Lascaux, a sky that made artificial light necessary, in a building constructed of the very latest materials, as in the depths of a cave.

'That train from Paris, now rushing through the countryside with its technicians to the rescue—floods would stop it. It would arrive ten hours late—why not? And its technicians, after discussing the pile with their colleagues at Damezan, would declare it much sicker than had been foreseen. 'A constitutional defect—that's what's wrong with this monster of yours, and so, *chers amis*, we give you good day, with the greetings of Oak Ridge and Harwell, Heisenberg and Nils Bohr into the bargain.'

And that old woman Boussoit asking his God to get the pile going again.

No, no, no!

"Madame Vauvert, get me Jean Muller at Saclay, please."

This would be no ordinary telephone call. It would last an hour, two, even three hours. As long as was necessary for reviewing all the problems of the moment, not excluding—far from it!—a glance at the future. At *D* and *E*. At *F* and *G*. The present rate of progress required it.

If only one could be sure, before passing an adverse opinion on any detail of pile or plans, that the remedy sought for had not

been discovered an hour earlier. Or that it would not be in the next year! Tens of thousands of luminous minds, night and day, were boring into the unknown from all sides.

There was nothing to equal the ardour of scientific research, the unceasing will to push the soundings still farther, to make them still more accurate.

The secretary's voice came down the line: M. Jean Muller was absent from Saclay.

"Is there anywhere I can get hold of him? Is he travelling? Or at home, sick? Do what you can, please, and find him for me."

"Very good, sir."

He went over to the window and looked at the sky. All that energy gathered in the clouds, to waste itself in the form of a useless cascade. A day would come when men would recuperate it between sky and earth.

"I'm sorry, sir, Monsieur Jean Muller can't be found anywhere."

"What's that? Put me through to his exchange."

"Very good, sir."

Saclay. The devitalized voices of secretaries who could say nothing. Yes, sir, we heard—you are speaking from Damezan—the call's important. But Monsieur Jean Muller isn't here, and we've no means of getting in touch with him, none . . . Would you like to speak to Monsieur Laperronnie? We're putting you through.

Disconcerted, Michel tapped the floor with his foot.

"Laperronnie? Renoir. How goes it, old man? . . . Tell me, what's come over Muller, playing hide and seek like this? I must have a talk with him. He can't have given orders not to put me through."

"Muller? You mean Jean Muller?"

There was a cough and the tone of the voice became colder.

"Yes, yes, the one and only Jean Muller," Michel insisted, trying to fend off an uneasy feeling.

After a silence Laperronnie declared that he knew nothing. Would Renoir like to speak to one of his colleagues instead of Muller? Cuisenier, for instance? Or Mazeraïn?

"Thanks for the suggestion," Michel replied haughtily. "It was Muller I wanted."

He hung up. When he hoped for encouragement he met with additional worry and upset.

Could he have another try? He had the feeling that the most tenacious enquiries would be in vain and that the conversation with Jean Muller would never take place. Should he ring Aubier?

No, no. A man who is liable to be given extraordinary responsibilities later on must deny himself the weakness of leaning on another in this way.

Once again, whatever the cost, he must grit his teeth. The train from Paris must be getting near Lyon. Boussois would have thrown his missal into a drawer and be coolly resuming his routine as a technician. Launay, that intangible and crafty fighter, the Bismarck and Guizot of the project, was busy 'bringing the points of view closer together', second by second: that is to say, he was leaving it to his adversaries to cover all the ground.

A smile broke from him. He would see Françoise again.

Nuclei spitting. Another cloud-burst. A gigantic old-fashioned rain-storm fell upon the windows and the ground outside—a miserable, savage experiment watched over by no one.

Patience.

3

ALL THE SAME, IT BEGAN WELL.

The old man had felt flattered at being visited in his own house, in his everyday setting, as a solid, hospitable farmer. Warned by Françoise, he had shaved. He had given a wipe to some Moustiers plates (which had not been used since his marriage) before filling them with biscuits.

The ancient, insatiable suspiciousness of the Gaul had forced from him the words: "What were you during the war?"—but the question was a particularly fortunate one. Michel and Ludovic had fought on the same side. He had sheltered fugitives from the S.T.O. at his farm. "One evening when there was the curfew, out there on the road—" but the peasant would say no more about that. An articulate man, all the same. He confided to Michel that his mother had been Protestant and his father Catho-

lic : which meant, he explained, that he was a Protestant from Sunday midnight to Thursday midday, and a Catholic for the rest of the week.

Not a word of insinuation about the relations between Françoise and Michel, not a single loose allusion.

"You must taste the wine I made this year."

Michel glanced at Françoise who had warned him of this rite, and nodded. He found very nearly the right words to praise the new vintage.

The old man smiled radiantly. He looked at the portrait of his dead wife and then, after smoothing his long moustache, asked permission to withdraw. But he had no sooner gone than he was back again. He threw down in front of Michel . . . a Colt.

"Put that in your pocket. It isn't loaded." He laughed. Tapping Françoise on the shoulder, he said that this was an affair between men : there was no need for her to understand. Michel, who liked rough diamonds, laughed too, pleased above all at recovering the weapon which had done him service in difficult circumstances.

"Come this way a moment. Mademoiselle Romieu will wait."

The two men went out into the blackness and driving rain. The invisible ground sank under their footsteps as though mildewed. Short though the distance was between the door and the storehouse, that sticky contact with the archaic forces of the world produced a strong impression of a movement backwards through the ages.

A dog growled out of the darkness. Two words in *patois*, an oath as thick as the night itself, silenced it.

Ludovic groped along the wall. A bulb came on with a crackle under an overhang. In its yellow light, barred by the long straight lines of the rain, a heap of miscellaneous objects could be seen. The peasant pulled away some tarpaulins, pushed aside some logs, and suddenly Michel pushed his glasses up and rubbed his eyes. He had just recognized the detector stolen from Cahuzac during a certain famous night.

"Well, you've got a nerve !" he snapped in sudden anger. "The revolver—who cares? But this ! Perhaps you didn't realize that it was extremely valuable."

"Even if it was worth millions, it would still be part of your damned machinery down there !" the farmer answered, folding

his arms. "I'm at home here. In my own house and on my own ground. All of us were here long before you. You've got their properties away from some of the weak ones with your dirty money, but there's one thing they can't sell you, and that's our country. A fine country full of grand peasants, that refuses to become an arsenal of bombs . . . Got that?"

"Heard it, that's all." Michel moved away into the rainy night. "You can repeat your beautiful story to the police."

"Do you mean you'd have the heart to denounce a resistant?" cried Ludovic. "Well, what d'you think of that?" He had uncovered two cases. Repeating "and that? and that?" he pulled up out of the straw, one by one, well-oiled rifle and machine-gun parts.

"While you were fighting your war as an officer, I was fighting mine. What else did you think, my boy? When it's the look of my own ground that's at stake I too have a thing or two to say."

Michel had moved nearer again. In the shelter of the tiled roof he wiped his glasses. He felt unsure of himself.

"You said 'arsenal'," he muttered with a wry smile. "If what you're hiding there isn't one, what is it?"

He went on smiling. Had he spoken or been simply dreaming? As soon as the man had restored its honest appearance to the disorder in the shed, they went out, one behind the other, through the primitive drip-drop-drip music of the rain, towards the house.

Ludovic picked up the bottle. He refilled Michel's glass and his own. If Mademoiselle Françoise would excuse them, they must drink a special toast, a man's one, to seal an agreement.

Michel hesitated. After what he had just seen, this peaceful interior with its reminder of his childhood revealed such a barbarous reality. The walls were three hundred years old, the farmer had said. Yes, and how many stupid dreams that meant, how many battles over a broken-down horse or an acre or two of vineyard—stark and bare with no grace but that of rock and no mystery whatever. When the most sinister problems of nuclear energy possessed, for their part, such grandeur!

But he heard a whisper on his right: "Don't go." It was Françoise, speaking almost without turning her head and almost without opening her lips.

She had guessed at his longing for escape? He wondered if the farmer had told her what he had hidden in the shed.

After all, if a man used deception, it was all right to deceive him.

"Agreement is easy," he declared ironically. "Simply wipe the slate clean. As for the future, a free hand."

Ludovic, likewise mocking, pointed to the glasses. They drank. The wine had acquired a cruel scent.

The eyes of the two men met.

"With people who are making bombs no promise is worth anything anyway!" said the old man; and when his guest said dryly that the Centre was working for industrial purposes: "Are you sure?"

"I invite you to come to Damezan, tomorrow, or the day after—whenever you like."

The man refused with a gesture. He was not such a fool! One man, and an outsider, all alone—they'd twist him round their little fingers.

This chap would need to be treated with nitric acid, Michel told himself. His conviction's ingrained in him. Stuck faster than the magnesium cladding to its rods . . . He glanced at Françoise, feeling lost but not having forgotten the need to convince the man.

"I've never known you cast doubt on a man's word," she said to the peasant.

There was a heavy silence. The old man in deep embarrassment stroked his chin. Then joy shone again in his eyes.

"If he swears to me he will never have anything to do with bombs, I'll believe him."

Michel shrugged his shoulders.

"You're arguing like a child. You're mixing up different questions."

So saying, he began to walk up and down the room. He felt the need to shake himself, all the greater since he was afraid the stubborn old man had got him in a trap.

"Listen," he began, "you who are a patriot——"

The old clock struck half past seven, two dull blows struck by a listless clapper. But the noise of the second one went on as though to issue in an echo.

The three people had cocked their ears : they thought of death, which was present in the air like stale smoke.

Let's try to see eye to eye, this man and me, Michel decided.

"Father Maurier," (he addressed him like a monk : was not old age, closed as it was to new things, rather like a religious order?) "you'll agree that you and I are made of the same stuff. You, like everyone else, have been given a picture of French atomic work that's a caricature, simply because we have to observe a strict secrecy, and this gives a free run to the malicious tongues of the half-wits. One of the scapegoats of our time—that's what we've become. But give me just five minutes' thought . . ."

The old man showed no reluctance. He pulled from his pocket a large red pipe, carved all over, and had begun to smoke it, gripping the bowl firmly.

Was it this that determined the course of Michel's remarks? Fire, said Michel, recapturing without difficulty in that simple house the youthful ardour of his student years—fire, that faithful and docile companion which nowadays symbolized so well the attachment of the world to the presence of man, had been, none the less, in early times a rebellious and rare force, which had had to be captured and domesticated by men who were real inventors. How could one avoid supposing that those first flames lit by human hand, representing, as they must have done, extraordinary events, must have brought with them catastrophes as harsh, by the scale of those times, as the Hiroshimas or Nagasakis of modern times, and that the malicious and naïve in those prehistoric years must have spoken against them?

A mysterious cat had jumped down silently from the top of a cupboard. Guided by its fine senses, it had gone over and crouched in front of the stove, a living and velvety image of the benefits of fire, and seemed to be listening to Michel.

As though from the depths of a dream, Michel was aware of it. When, quoting mockingly the official declarations that 'We have now entered the age of chemistry', he raised his arm in a broad gesture, he seemed to be calling the cat to witness. Gleams sparkled in the animal's eyes . . . The age of chemistry, he said, had in fact preceded humanity. The first men had taken their places in it quite naturally, as naturally as they had entered the world itself.

"Father Maurier, the atom and the transmutations of matter are not some maleficent creation of the men whom people have the face to call the sorcerers of modern times—the scientists. Nothing of the sort. There were already there, all over nature, in the blazing heart of the sun and in the steamy seething at the centre of the earth.

"Father Maurier, you, as a man of bread and wine, cheese and honey, live surrounded by chemistry. It's there, in this newsprint, in that photograph. In that patch on the wall, or in that huge confused fall of rain, of which not a single drop falls and makes its tinkling heard without obeying a whole sheaf of laws."

The peasant, that brachycephalic, stocky man with his pepper and salt hair that still curled on his temples, smoked on. His scorched-earth complexion spoke of the scents of Araby. His regular profile and large eyes spoke of the Roman legionaries.

The five minutes' thought became ten, twelve . . . The three strokes of a quarter to eight, struck by the clock as though by the imperturbable stage-manager in a theatre, were needed to make Michel break off. In the middle of a sentence. With a shake of the head and a slow, slightly weary descent of the right hand down the side of his body, in the manner of the old story-tellers for whom, always, the best remained unsaid.

He remembered André in Dr Laffon's drawing-room, but that was now so far away, so far away.

The cat was the first to move. It rose, arched its back, and slid off.

The old man shook himself. His long eyelashes blinked. Perhaps he had already forgotten what had been said, the fact remained that he had been under its enchantment. As at the beginning of the siesta, in the hay, when the landscape outside surges over a man and holds him down by the shoulders.

"You," he said, "believe in what you're doing. That's something."

Françoise smiled.

"I'll drive you back, give the boy a kiss, and then I must be off."

It was easily said.

The screenwiper purred, with its two rubber shoes feverishly shoving aside the mad shower of raindrops which, monotonously

like locusts, rushed out of the night only to get themselves massacred. The train must have arrived at Arles and, on the way to the Centre, Boussot-the-conscience would be explaining the situation to the three colleagues from Saclay, but the deep cold night, indifferent and futile, was pouring to the ground on all sides. Which made even more sweet the warmth of the young feminine body on his right, a few inches away, and its breathing had the calm of sleep.

The car moved off. The successive images of the road seemed to melt and trickle on the windscreen like greyish wax from bad candles. The headlights gave a poor light. But Michel suddenly increased the speed.

Abruptly a lashing wave of muddy water spurted up—as it seemed, right in his face. The man had barely time to jam the brakes on—after bouncing violently twice they came to rest, and all seemed plunged into blackness. The screenwiper was jibbing at its task.

“No harm done,” he muttered. “Sorry. I won’t drive so fast.”

He felt a twinge of disappointment because she did not thank him for what seemed to him a concession. Had he not been wrong, at the farm, in trying to come down to the level of an ignoramus? Now she was despising him. “Tender-hearted, stroke a nettle, and it stings you for your pains . . .”

“That speech of mine was idiotic,” he said roughly.

Françoise sighed.

“You were humble, Michel, and I can’t tell you how that moved me. But forgive me, I expect you find the word ridiculous.”

Now it was his turn not to answer. Humble? A Michel Renoir? a man of Damezan?

The rain slid through the light of the headlamps like a cloud of insects.

The peasant girl who had been looking after Michel opened the door. She said that all was well and then, without more ado, she slipped out into the night they had just come from. Her bicycle lamp could be seen being turned on, then moving out of sight. She had three kilometres to go to get home.

In the main room a folding table had been laid : two places and a bunch of roses.

"I asked her to get something ready for you," she whispered, "but you haven't time, so I won't press you."

In the adjoining small room, which was now his, Michel junior was in bed. He was reading a book of Madagascan stories, and when he saw his father he forgot to smile. Michel sat down on the bed and took his hands.

"Well? Happy, or not happy?"

"Happy," the boy answered listlessly, and Françoise bent down and tapped him on the cheek.

"During the day he has little friends to play with—boys and girls," she explained. "But I'll leave you two together."

Michel stood up and said she must stay with them, but she had already gone.

Her departure awoke in him a bitter feeling whose cause he did not realize. Without suspecting how odd his attitude was, he went on staring fixedly at the closed door. He could no longer think what to say to his son. And besides, the conversation did not interest him now.

"Do you like your food?" he said suddenly, to salve his conscience.

Instead of answering 'Yes', the boy nodded vigorously. Seeing that his father was not looking at him he leant forward on his elbow and asked the inevitable question: "When's Mummy coming?"

"One of these days," the grown man stammered. And to punish himself for already wanting the leave the room, he went and sat down, like a child, as far as possible from the door, just in front of the window. He could feel the flight of each second that passed as a definite and fresh privation of happiness.

In a mist he saw Michel junior raise one end of his pillow and pull out his mother's letters, carefully hidden away there. Instead of moving him, the gesture irritated him. Could we not, just for once, be frank? You can have your mother, just leave me the woman who's gone out of the room.

After re-reading the whole of the blue sheet of paper, the child folded it again and returned it to its hiding place. Under the eiderdown his hands again found the book of stories. Staring at the ceiling he let his thoughts wander. The rain could be heard striking the ground, on and on.

I know what you wanted me to do, Michel thought. Ask you to read me your mother's letter. A lot I care for its baby language, my boy . . .

It was too painful : Michel stood up. He tiptoed towards the comforting door. He was about to whisper to the child, as he passed, to sleep well, but the boy was too quick for him. "Daddy?"

Michel ground his teeth : that shrill familiar nickname reduced him to a flunkey.

"What do you want?"

The boy did not seem to notice the irritation in the voice, or the frown. He stirred the bedclothes, making the book fall to the ground, and asked in a low voice : "Is the lady I'm staying with a relation?"

Michel bent down to pick up the book. Without looking at the boy he stammered a few unfinished sentences. A cousin by marriage. People they had forgotten about. In the depths of the country . . . "There's your book. Take care of it."

Father and son now looked at each other. Their faces were quite close. I can't, after all, carry frankness to the point of telling him that he's staying with my mistress, Michel thought. Let's not lose our heads. I've put him in the hands of an excellent teacher who is firm with him, and I'm sure he'll learn a lot here. My life doesn't hurt his.

Instinctively, as he had done a few days earlier in his room in Paris when it was his mother who came to see him, the child pushed his head forward, like a ram, to receive the goodnight kiss. Michel mistook this for a nervous movement. He pushed away the docile head, which was not even aware that it had offered itself.

"I'm putting the light out. Go to sleep."

Michel junior turned his face to the wall.

It was as natural as the fall of a leaf : Françoise, advancing, received the embrace Michel had denied to his son. And suddenly he kissed her passionately.

If he abandoned himself further he would not have the strength to leave the house till tomorrow ; but Damezan required his presence that evening. Immediately. The whole of Damezan : its site, its men, its machines, its ideas . . .

With a slight sound the door opened. Michel junior appeared, a delicious and infuriating magazine picture. With bare feet, tousled hair, chubby cheeks, and his dressing-gown open showing blue pyjamas. He said calmly that he wanted a handkerchief.

The man and woman exchanged a guilty glance. Thinking back on what might have happened, they felt a sense of deep relief. Perhaps also the need to read a promise in that candid form.

Did the child suspect? It was as though he were sniffing the room. He did not go.

Françoise went over to him. "Why didn't you ask for it sooner?" she said severely. "You're not to start again. You'll find a handkerchief in your chest-of-drawers, in the right drawer. Run along . . . And don't forget to shut your door."

Without a word the little boy was already off.

"Bravo," said Michel. "That's what I call authority," and when Françoise cried out uneasily, "A mother can't ever be replaced!" he took her in his arms. He called her his wife. He was obliged to go. He would come back soon . . . if she agreed . . . at about midnight. Or perhaps a little later.

She whispered that she would always be waiting for him.

Surrounded by calm and bathed in warm light, was not the Gallo-Roman Virgin the symbol of waiting—she who had overcome the friction of the elements and the centuries, burial and iconoclasts, to smile here this evening, as purely as on the first morning of her existence, in the presence of the love of a man and woman? Michel, gazing at her, could not believe his eyes. So much pity on that face! A feeling of shame which he could not explain came over him. He turned on his heel.

On the staircase, whose coldness each time surprised him, the enormous uninterrupted rushing sound of the raindrops on the tiles and in the gutters and on the ground was more clearly audible.

"A real sailor's leave-taking," said Françoise. "Try not to drive too fast."

He thanked her and promised to try.

She opened the front door. The noise of the rain invaded the house irresistibly, as frightening as a panic.

"What a night. I feel terrible, letting you go."

He turned away to the darkness. What was this poor, still noticeable darkness but a stream to be crossed? The real darkness lived on the Damezan plateau. In the fragile heart of those all powerful machines. He smiled. From now on he was much stronger.

4

THE WAYS AHEAD SUGGESTED BY THE ROAD SUCCEEDED ONE another—greasy, hardly distinguishable streams rolling under the car in the dirty light from its headlamps, and looking all alike. The man lost his way. It was seven kilometres before he realized . . . But the strange night had now no power to vex him : he laughed out loud and, with a lorry-driver's assurance, turned about at the middle of a curve—*dolce* . . . *presto*—while an even more violent burst of rain drummed on the coachwork and daubed impartially windscreen and road surface.

High up in which might be the sky, the chimney lights of *A* glittered like feeble pin-points. The rain during the day had been an insult to the majesty of the plateau and its buildings, but the night rain, that obstinate disguiser of things, restored to Damezan its dense mystery. The hidden monsters kept their watch better in that blackness. The surf of the falling drops signified the world's grinding submission.

On the first floor of the building where the Director's office was, in that sacred place, light filtered out from beyond the curtains. A report? Visitors? Telephone calls? Certainly some useful work. That diabolical Launay was capable of settling the strike before the Members of Parliament.

To think that a Launay, a Chayriguès and a Thomas-Laborde co-existed in one age! But to hell with that mountebank and that old butterfly!

Genaille, Warzyck and Laroche had visited the nave and control room of the pile in the company of Boussot, who had then brought them to Michel's office. They had been there a quarter of an hour. But Michel had known them for a long time : he

smiled and shook hands with them without a word, then immediately spoke the "Well?" which opened the discussion.

The invisible, silent pile entered the room. It was the accused. And the night was on the watch for the verdict. The rain, the mud, the darkness—all those poor things . . .

At one and the same second, Genaille, a subtle fair-haired man, and Warzyck, a stocky redhead, had looked at their colleague Laroche and he, guessing what they were about to do, had lowered his eyes. Once again, each time the same, that authority attached to his person, although he was the youngest present and had no official title! But what could prevent the others from knowing that this fellow, with his hair already going grey and his muddy-coloured face scored with wrinkles, had given his name to two important discoveries?

"Really? Must I do the talking?"

No one answered. Methodically he lit a cigarette from the fag-end between his lips and, with a quick movement, put it down on an ash-tray, holding on to the stub—to put it out more effectively or to give himself time to think?—for several seconds.

That was how he would have held the pile if he could, but wasn't it better still to conquer by mind than by hand? In a jerky, strangely firm voice he expressed the opinion so impatiently waited for. It was useless to be sentimental about *A*. What mattered for Damezan today was *B*, tomorrow it would be *C*, and so on. Therefore the first thing was to settle the strike. Not that that meant they would neglect the reactor. Far from it. Once the radioactivity had gone down and the contaminated rods could be replaced it would be got going again. It would act as a plutonium slot-machine. It would work on reduced power so as to present no danger. When *B* had started working, one of its days would be worth ten of *A*'s.

Michel closed his eyes. He was hurt—for his own sake and for *A*'s—at hearing someone already talking of throwing on the rubbish heap, practically speaking, the machine-monument whose articulations had seemed to them all so flexible on the first morning of its working! Was not the fact that it had started ahead of schedule the proof positive of its healthiness, like the squalling of a newborn baby in the arms of the midwife? It was as easy to steer as a ship; and faster, much faster.

Had the crisis of that night of alarm then been useless?

A voice rose, making an objection. Had not the British and Americans, Genaille was asking, restored their full speed of working to reactors that had been even more gravely damaged, once the repairs had been done? A ding-dong argument began. Laroche reminded them that there were certain foreign techniques they still did not know.

A heavy silence had fallen. From behind his closed eyelids, smarting with fatigue, Michel guessed that the others expected a reply from him. So did the pile, disappointed by his listlessness. And Françoise, Aubier, Launay, Martineau, all the workers . . . He stood up :

"This is a purely consultative meeting. We're not a body with powers to take decisions."

"I entirely agree," said Laroche.

"The last speaker's point of view represents roughly what Aubier thinks, and what he has instructed me to defend. As a matter of course, we shall repair the pile. Tomorrow we shall settle a schedule of work. We must refrain from any value judgment about a reactor which has become part of the history of its country and has, in its field, done what it set out to do."

Laroche opened wide astonished eyes, in which there shone what was perhaps a beginning of anger—but he controlled himself. The "Certainly" which came from him was uttered in a level voice. He lit a cigarette . . . He did not feel he had made a *volte-face*. The essential thing in a discussion must be not to impose on others an emotional opinion, but to help a group to reach the point of action.

The men were standing up now, putting on their raincoats. Was the pile satisfied? It had silently left them. Between one moment and the next it had aged terribly . . . But that was to be expected.

Michel manoeuvred to get Laroche into a quiet corner. The courtesy of the man from Saclay in not jibbing under criticism seemed to him quite normal. He wished to exploit his advantage still more, for the good of the Service.

"I too began by being simply a researcher," he muttered.

Laroche narrowed his eyes.

"I see what you mean."

"Over the entrance to Saclay you could stretch a banner with the motto: 'What is truth?' Whereas on ours, at Damezan, we should proclaim: 'I am the truth.' Here we are busy building and producing, are we not? We need Saclay to help us get the locomotive back on the rails, not to change rails or locomotive."

With a wide nervous movement Laroche held out his hand and Michel shook it with both his. They looked at each other fixedly. They felt like two ships checking their compasses together in the bay before a long voyage.

"One question," said Michel. "I shan't force you to answer. What's happened to Jean Muller?"

The hand he held between his contracted and instantly broke free. The Saclay man had turned pale. Something very like fear flitted across his eyes.

"He's in hospital. He'd been very imprudent in his work."

Michel swallowed his saliva and it took him quite a while before he could reply. "Is his case serious?"

The other raised his hand in a discouraged gesture.

With his hands clasped behind his back Michel strode up and down the room. He had excused himself, saying he had a letter to write, and his colleagues had gone off together to face again the dirty provincial rain and the greasy roads—at which Jean Muller would not have jibbed any more than they . . . In his mind he could hear again his friend confiding to him on the telephone, only a month ago: 'I'm watching some fascinating experiments.'

Doubtless—alas!—they would never know the exact truth about his case. Laroche himself probably didn't know much. If Michel, knowing his discretion, had tried to find out more elsewhere, he would at best have drawn down on himself the reply that he had already been told too much.

A Jean Muller in hospital! That sovereign brow from now on useless. Poor chap. Lost, of course, lost. All those diseases that have no mercy: leukaemia, generalized cancer, tumour of the brain.

A force of nature, a lucid creature like him . . . Thrown aside like a reactor of secondary interest . . . Or an old man in the Stockholm exercises.

Unless, in that fierce domain situated beyond the visible world, words had lost their meaning . . .

Had not the Japanese fishermen on *The Lucky Dragon* been 'forces of nature'? When their boat had received, on a calm morning in the remote Pacific, the silent fall of a strange kind of snow. It had no smell. Those who tried its taste hesitated between salt and sand. But it was radioactive ash, and the monstrous cataclysm which had brought it into being had been caused by scientists.

Even if you were the finest athlete on earth, with pectoral muscles like the roots of an oak, a few well-aimed radiations would transform you into a bag of putrescence . . .

Your name was Kobayama. You were the *Lucky Dragon's* radio-operator. 'Radio'—see the irony? Some of the ash fell on your hair and face, and so, when you got back on shore, you would die as if fire were gnawing you.

The man sat down and noted in his diary, against tomorrow, the names Cahuzac and Pennguern. He must not let the matter of the detector rest. But let Father Maurier not worry : one would manage without giving him away. What he had done had been fair war, according to his lights. Scientists also proceed like men of the Maquis !

And now Michel could turn the lights out and leave the room.

First he took the Nouvillargues road. It was raining cats and dogs, making the noise of a waterfall. The windscreen steamed like a marsh. A curtain of greyish pitch, raked about by a weary screenwiper, renewed itself ceaselessly and interposed itself between the glass and the moving road surface. The plane-trees flanking the road had disappeared.

Furiously Michel accelerated. Love must not be kept waiting. Out there—— But the first thing was not to get killed . . .

The slime-covered Vedette had neither skidded nor collided : it stood motionless a few inches from the back of a trailer. Another accident that didn't happen ! The people who crack up hydraulic brakes are scientific benefactors. But what bastards those lorry-drivers are ! Fancy stopping a tanker-lorry right on a curve, at the approach to a bridge . . .

A hand knocked on the window to his right. So they would argue it out man to man ?

No. The fellow thrust his rain-swollen face into the car and had already started talking. In the past he'd had several nasty mixups with rivers, and so, before venturing out on to the bridge, he'd been cautious and gone to have a look. The Réguron was as full as an egg and flowing very fast. There was not much more than an inch left between the bridge and the water. And the banks were soft. It was certainly too risky for a 'heavy vehicle'—if not for a Vedette.

Michel had recognized the chap : it was that madman who had refused to draw to one side on the morning before the flare-up at the pile, and who had shouted abuse against the 'lords of Damezan'.

The other had also recognized Michel. But the man of Damezan decided to put Françoise first.

"I should like to have a try all the same," he declared with a smile.

The lorry-driver merely gestured in answer.

The river was roaring like a crowd in a stadium. Above it the Vedette nosed out on to the frail bridge. Better not give way to pride and go fast. He could not see the water, could hardly see the parapet. Only thirty yards to go, but that is a lot in a case like this and when one isn't a particle of matter in the hands of scientists.

How Muller would prefer this danger to his own plight ! If the bridge gave, one wasn't even quite certain to be drowned.

Michel had no sooner had this thought than he felt his tyres reach the farther bank. As if his friend had served him as protection.

Pyjamas. A sponge-bag. The alarm-clock. There, that's enough to start a new life with . . . Eagerly, like a schoolboy on holiday, the man slipped out into the passage with his old leather brief-case in his hand. Where he is going they won't be able to get him on the telephone. So what ? Since the pile is not working, no night alarm of an instructive sort should come from the Centre. If *B*'s building-site catches fire, it won't need an atomic champion to do the necessary. And as for Juliette . . .

If Juliette tasted her share of worry or even of fear, no one could complain of that. Whereas who could blame him, a man

who was always in the breach, for arranging for himself a sort of pause between two series of excessively tense days? Or for claiming his handful of happiness?

Suddenly, as though by enchantment, it stopped raining. The pencil of the headlights illuminated great stretches of road, silent and dark. The reddish glow from a factory kindled the horizon. A small animal crossed the road in a flash, like a squib exploding on the ground. The sky rose higher : in it, heavy black masses seemed to be parting and scattering. All that funereal end-of-autumn seemed to have such need of affection that the long pale brightness of crescent moon began to make up its mind to emerge, like some trembling anemone that is equally dear, whether it is precocious or late.

Here was the hamlet from which he had telephoned one afternoon. Not a light. Not a dog's bark. Long dripping cypresses. What did the funereal aspect of that countryside matter, since from its thick mud there could arise statues full of youth, like fresh flowers? The lights were out in old Ludovic's house, so close to the place which had changed the course of things, and how could that be sinister? The man realized he was singing. He did not realize that this had not happened to him for the last three years.

How feverishly he got out of the car and made for the tall house ! Two shutters with a light showing discreetly through them awaited him. Who could reproach him, then, for finding himself so young in heart? Launay, of course. Launay, in the name of Damezan and of all that Damezan represented. But if that master of austerity could sound men's hearts ! Whatever the solemn night in this place communicated, it was not forgetfulness of the struggle.

5

"ARLES ! . . . ARLES ! . . . SHOUTED THE GUARD.

Was it the uncertain dawn sky or was it the old and badly-lit station that suddenly smelt so strongly of lubricating oil and dusty rooms?

On the platform there was a stir and murmur of people, then

a movement in the direction of a sleeping-car from which a tall, very official-looking man was preparing to descend. Used to these receptions, the private secretary from the Préfecture led the pack.

The scene was enacted as though it had been rehearsed hundreds of times. While the private secretary, having enquired about the comfort of the journey, drew from his briefcase the small sheaf of documents he had to hand to the Members of Parliament, they attacked him with a question—"Well, what stage have things got to?"—which could only have one meaning. In short, they had not left the capital: the French governmental crisis was still Problem No. 1. That very night, while the train was between Dijon and Lyons, a decisive vote, whose result the augurs had not dared to forecast, had been taking place in the *Chambre*.

The private secretary displayed the reflexes of a well-broken-in official, for whom every government, one second before its fall, is The Government—the one that doesn't deserve to fall.

"Doesn't look too good," he muttered, looking away towards the warm steam that crawled about under the carriages.

"Have you any figures?"

"There'll be at least eight votes too few."

Perreyve and Guerroy looked at each other. Why could they not break away from this crowd, now bearing them towards the exit like two statues of sovereign gods, and wait for the first fast train returning to Paris? Their perfectly normal absence would have been considered, up there, as a subtle move; but they ought to be back, now, for the party discussions.

"It's impossible," said Guerroy to his colleague as they walked along and shook various people by the hand, "to think of staying here for two whole days, isn't it? Shall we go back this evening?"

"Agreed."

Iturribe and Rouquiès had forgotten André Thomas-Laborde. For Iturribe it was already enough of a job to shove his way through to the Members of Parliament and make sure that in the afternoon, as soon as the banquet was over, they would come over to the Centre and be willing to pay it a half-hour visit.

André had made the journey with Christiane in another carriage. On the platform he looked like an ordinary tourist giving his arm to his half-awakened young wife. Keeping away from the official

flurry, he waited till the fleet of cars had driven off before emerging.

At the Hotel Carlton, where the main rooms had been reserved and the discussions began at once, Iturribe at last remembered the existence of a third person who was arriving, and he telephoned to Damezan to say he had lost the geneticist . . . At the very moment when, from the main post office in Arles, André was ringing up Michel.

The exchange at the Centre put him through to Mme Vauvert, who had her instructions : M. Renoir, she said, was in conference, and she did not know when they could get hold of him. She hung up. André, furious, rang up again, this time asking for M. Launay. Same setback. After giving his name and waiting for a full minute, he was warmly advised to go to the Hotel Carlton, where the representatives of the Centre were and a banquet had been arranged for 12.30.

"The Ministry didn't sent me down here for a blow-out," shouted André, and himself hung up . . . What idiocy! Even down to the underlings in that organization, the secrets of matter seemed to have become an obsession.

Damezan had no right to play at being the Lhasa of nuclear energy! After they had had a good walk in the familiar yet strange town, from the cloisters to the Roman arena, from the arena to the Rhône and from the Rhône back to the cloisters, André went into a disaffected chapel which housed the office of a garage, and hired a small car.

Touchingly, like a lost spring that shakes free of its sand, or an old animal that has at last got well and decides to live again, the sun suddenly unveiled, strident with straw-yellow rays. André stopped the car at the top of a bare and rounded hill with a vast view. As calm as a night countryside, the landscape divided and divided into the gentle multitudinous details of farms, fallow lands and rocks, each thing becoming a simple jar into which fell the fertile rain—blue, green or golden—of the light.

High clouds wandered above the plain and mountains, like huge kites.

It was indeed the landscape chosen by Van Gogh, stone and field and light which the cypresses in the valleys and on the crests spiced by their solemn bitterness.

"They haven't chosen a mediocre place for their dirty work," the geneticist muttered; but he reproached himself for his jealousy—it seemed to him base—and invited his companion to get out and walk a few steps on the road.

While Christiane was gathering long sprays of briar with white blossoms curled up by the frost, he climbed up a pile of stones and, haunted by the memory of Van Gogh, turned eastwards and tried to look the sun in the face. With the same naïve fervour he had watched long ago, from the top of the cliffs, for the green flash . . . He shut his eyes at once and all sorts of colours darted about under his eyelids. He was back in his laboratory at Ermenonville, examining through his glass the plumage and webbed feet of one of his strange ducks . . . He jumped down. Genetics was also guilty of cruelty. Why did he have it in for Damezan?

The landscapes began to flow past again. In the distance a mountain-face gleamed through the golden mist like a column of snow . . .

Then there appeared masses and outlines that no longer belonged to Van Gogh.

But the machine-monuments, as they emerged gradually from the *garrigues*, to whose feet they had seemed to cling, and came forward and squared their shoulders on the stage of a long, lonely plateau, did not cause in André the shock of anguish he had expected. An enquiry into the dangerous operations carried out in this place, which his binoculars showed to be hypocritically fenced about with barbed-wire like a common powder-magazine, was one thing; the insertion of this place into the visible world was another. No, this complex of buildings in no way contradicted the hills. The tall chimney with the deflector rose up like a cypress. And the careful dispersal of the finished and unfinished buildings gave the futurist Acropolis the air of those grand classical ruins of the high places, which are as necessary to the landscape as are the grass and the birds. Was not the whole thing flowering out of a pebbly soil that had been tilled again and again by great races, assemblers of dreams and of stones?

André walked out to the end of the rocky spur, carved by nature into innumerable hollows and coated with red dust, below which the cultivated land fell away. He sat down, folded his arms and silently contemplated Michel's feverish domain. He returned

to find that Christiane, whom he had left in the car, had also got out and gone up to the top of a hillock, a hundred yards away. With great application she was drawing the landscape in a mysterious notebook.

He came up to her.

"Doesn't it make you think of Vézelay?" he asked as she looked up.

"Even more of San Gimignano, and of Luxor."

He shut one eye and pondered for a few seconds.

"I confess," he said at last, "this landscape disturbs me. I was expecting to find here confirmation of Poe's phrase, in which he accuses modern civilization of having sullied the magnificent face of nature—and I stumble on a complex of architecture which, far from destroying the character of the place, seems to exalt it. The men who chose this site in which to promote new realities found a way of obeying, with a good grace, the necessity of basing oneself on the world. Would you believe it? Threading through those masses of concrete and glass I find two of the majesties that belonged to our remotest ancestors—water and the wind."

The guards at the gate were inflexible. M. Launay had just left for Arles; M. Renoir was not there either . . . "Come back at three and fix up what you can with Monsieur Ituribe."

The citadel of the atoms observed the old laws of fortresses. And yet it had not laid claim to its system of moat and glacis, but allowed the sinuous, hand-cultivated vines to come right up to its precincts, and it sheltered with its strange monuments a tangle of brambles and bushes no longer grubbed up by the goats, but still full of the whistlings of birds.

Evidently the watch-dogs did not include village restaurants among the secrets of national defence, for they had been willing to indicate one. Six kilometres away. On a village square . . .

A place worthy of an old print: muscular-rooted plane-trees, bowling-alleys, and small houses, sturdy, delapidated, with imposing ornamentation. The sun had disappeared, depriving the Roman tiles of their brown gaiety, but the dry grey light was still of good metal.

What on earth was that din which welcomed them? In the main room, as challenging as a slot-machine, a brand-new tele-

vision screen presented, howling, flat faces convulsed with shudders. The chairs were turned towards it as though towards an altar in a church.

André had no time to turn round and go out. The proprietor, with his napkin tucked into his neck, was already there, cheerfully proud of his modernism.

Ought not an enquiry into Damezan to take account also of these mediocre realities?

"I can serve you a nice little meal, *messieurs-dames*. With the strike, which has hit us hard, I haven't dared to open the snack bar; but the set was already ordered, so one might as well use it. It wakes you up, this machine, doesn't it?"

Christiane smiled secretly when she saw that André had not the courage to answer back.

They sat down and ordered at random.

'... failed to obtain a majority. The final results of the vote of confidence are: 236 votes against, 219 for, 82 abstentions. Informed of the results by Monsieur Blanchard, who handed to him the resignation of the Cabinet, the President of the Republic has, however, refused to accept it and ...'

"And quite right, too. How unfortunate it all is!" groaned the proprietor as he brought, without waiting to be asked, a bottle of wine. "Blanchard's no worse than another . . . There, try that. We call it now *Coulée de Damezan*."

Disgusted by the political commentaries, he switched off the television set abruptly and set the radio going: its programme at this time would be more acceptable. Fragments of a song hit came up and exploded into the refrain like some grave catastrophe:

Isn't it nice . . .

To lie in the arms . . .

Of somebody . . . with quite different charms . . .

André, with his fair hair, Christiane with her dark hair; the proprietor winked. The radio has these lucky hits, hasn't it? . . .

The geneticist looked down at the table. The music disgusted him. With the love he had for mankind, he wished he could believe in God, to ask forgiveness in the name of them all.

Except Launay, who sat at the head of the table, and whose large eyes sometimes wandered to the windows—beyond them, thirty kilometres away to the west, lay Damezan and its servitudes—everyone in the large dining-room of the Hotel Carlton, whose mirrors echoed images of the company to infinity, seemed filled with euphoria. Hadn't the *Timbale aux Ris de Veau Jules César* just been served, and did not an agreement appear to be in sight after the morning's close discussions, which had led to concessions on both sides? Would it not be sufficient to get a few clauses straight that same afternoon at Damezan? Tomorrow morning, very probably, work would be resumed on the building-sites. No remorse, therefore, need hide itself in the sauces. When Guerroy slipped out, several of those present had whispered that the intestines of Members of Parliament played, it seemed, dirty tricks on their masters.

The Member of Parliament had simply shut himself up in the telephone-booth and rung up the chairman of his party in Paris . . . No, no, the refusal of the President of the Republic meant nothing. He had merely gone through the motions as President, because the financial mess——

"How's the Bourse taking it?"

"Very badly, old man. Very, very badly. The franc will go to glory, that's quite certain . . . See you tomorrow. The meeting's at ten."

With an inscrutable face Guerroy returned to his seat at Launay's right. Launay, having guessed the reason for his absence, leaned over towards him :

"Is the fall of the Government confirmed?"

"It's certain," spluttered the other, champing hard to catch up. The Director rubbed his hands nervously :

"So today is Dupes' Day. So our strike will go on for another two months."

Guerroy's fork let fall the unctuous morsel which it had speared :

"You exaggerate, I think, *cher monsieur le Directeur*."

Launay did not bother to reply. He wiped the corners of his mouth delicately, like a woman who has put on too much lipstick; but in that poor large intelligent head of his, with its readiness to suffer, the figures were dancing a wild round. Market prices wages cost of production. Market prices wages cost of production.

Market prices wages cost of production. Market . . . There was no one with him to share this torment. Beyond a certain point his colleagues, even those in the administrative section, could no longer follow. Alone. One was alone. Without any power over the march of time or over the caprices of certain men.

And yet one must keep on . . . Be scolded one day, in measured but all the more wounding terms, for not having carried out the programme.

Ingratitude was innumerable, like useless talk.

Guerroy had finished his plateful. He did not often meet people like Launay, and he felt rather ashamed : it was so regrettable not to win sympathy.

"If you like," he muttered, "I'll stay till tomorrow evening. And I'll ask Perreyve to——"

"It would be no use," said the Director. "No use whatever."

The roast duck made its entry.

A wind had arisen, which felt as if it might turn to a mistral. Out of the abandoned quarries and trenches dug for mains it flung pieces of grit and clouds of dust, debris of soil which had been buried for thousands of centuries and now took to wandering again.

Wearing their plastic helmets, the two men, brought together for one afternoon, made headway against the gusts, leaning over at the same angle—a brotherly tandem.

André had not blamed Ituribe for his refusal to allow Christiane into the Centre. He admitted that, to other eyes than his, it might seem shocking that the lovely girl should wander about, like a tourist at Aigues-Mortes, over 'his plateau on which the geometrical lines of the buildings and the beauty of the site concealed grim battles. Had not he himself, one night, prevented Juliette from disturbing him in the laboratory? He had excused himself to his friend and given her the grey motoring map, with permission to drive as far as the Camargue.

Every time André had uttered the name of Michel Renoir, he had sensed in the Public Relations Officer a surge of distrust, but what of that? On delicate subjects the man had a frankness rarely to be found in those of his profession. This was extremely agreeable.

Taking his courage in both hands, therefore, André began to talk, while sand with the taste of an ancient tomb kept whipping him in the face. He imagined that at Damezan he must have been represented as an enemy. But seriously, without the atomic scientists' beautiful and marvellously simple conceptions of the composition of matter, genetics would not have been able to make its recent advances. Einstein was admirable, as admirable as Mendel and Michurin, and perhaps even more so. Yes, admirable. The only trouble was the practical applications. In that field the atomic scientists seemed to lack prudence. Reasonable minds ought to help them to see their work with a sense of proportion.

He stopped, breathless, wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. Iturribe had calmly taken him by the arm :

"From here," he began in a proud tone which accentuated his refusal to reply to what seemed to him blah, "you can get a fairly good idea of what *B* and *C* will look like from outside. Two years ago, in this same place, you would have found only stones and brambles. You can easily imagine the work needed to think out and then carry out on a commercial scale such projects. Anyone who loves his country must be glad that it has managed to show vigour once more and build its twentieth-century cathedrals at Damezan."

Dumbfounded by the calm with which his companion had ignored what he had said, André took his time gazing at the unfinished, but indeed grandiose, monuments which he had seen from a distance a few hours ago : then they had been drowned in the *garrigues*, but now they reared up in front of him their huge, double solitude—extraordinary feats of creation.

"Is what you've just said," he asked at last, "something you are saying on your own account, or a lesson you are reciting?"

Iturribe with a broad smile replied that he always thought what he said, but that, in certain cases, frankness harmonized with the requirements of the job.

André glanced again at the enormous façade of *B* and the gigantic armature of *C*, then lowered his eyes. He growled that no attempt was being made to understand him. Moving concrete about, or manufacturing pure uranium for the sole satisfaction of doing something impressive and difficult, was all very well. The cathedrals of the Middle Ages were still, most of them, in existence,

kindling in their admirers an enthusiasm as great as ever, whereas these poor nuclear reactors, for all their monstrous dimensions, were hardly destined to live beyond twenty years or so. What did that suggest? That the only thing deserving of interest was an intelligent effort undertaken for the good of humanity and within a nation's means.

Iturribe uttered not a cheep. He picked up a pebble and threw it upwind.

The movement annoyed his companion whose voice rose higher and higher. To hell with it, they refused to take him seriously and yet, once and for all, he wasn't an enemy! He had read dozens of articles and official reports, some of them confidential, savagely attacking the government's nuclear policy on technical grounds; but on this ground he himself refrained from intervening: he was not a man who was for or against plutonium (to use an expression that summed up the two extreme positions), he was merely a man who wanted——

This time he was interrupted. Iturribe said dryly that, as regards theories, Damezan was a non-starter. Damezan received orders and, as far as possible, carried them out. That was the size of it.

"Like a cigarette?" he concluded.

André accepted one. Oh, these Damezan people . . .

"If you like," the other went on, "we'll visit *B* and *C*, simply as engineers. After that I'll take you to Monsieur Launay, who—and I'm not joking—will be delighted to see you. To him you represent an honestly acquired competence in a different branch from his, but one that is just as worthy of respect, and he'll let you question him. Only for half an hour, though, for he's even busier than usual; but in half an hour, you'll agree, one can get a lot said."

In the hall outside the Director's office, the atmosphere was overheated and heavy, in spite of the air-conditioning. For more than two hours twenty men, the representatives of the workers and the employers, had been waiting, smoking as they waited, for M. Launay's discussion with the Members of Parliament and the people from the Préfecture to come to an end; the cushioned double doors, which allowed no sound of voices to filter through, remained obstinately closed. Strange suspicions arose in the two

camps as they observed each other. Each one resolved, when the text of the agreement was read out, to weigh all its terms carefully before initialling it.

The geneticist and his companion recoiled as soon as they emerged under the neon lighting which fell only on drawn faces and weary attitudes. But Iturribe, who felt at home here, as elsewhere at Damezan, had no intention of giving up. He was already signing to one of the messengers to get a secretary to announce their arrival by telephone, but André drew him back by the sleeve. "Let's go." The unanimous fierce hostility of those silent looks concentrated on him was too embarrassing.

"With things as they are," said Iturribe, when they had moved away, "you'd better come back tomorrow. I will take you to Monsieur Bousso." "

"Who's that?"

"The engineer to A."

"Perhaps he too is a friend of Monsieur Renoir?" said André at a venture.

Iturribe moved on without answering, and was still silent when they had got out into the clear night, in which a cold wind puffed and whistled. A jeep belonging to the Security Services, with great serious white headlamps like the eyes of a wild beast, was sliding along a distant drive. In what world were they? Up in the air, around the neck of A's chimney, a necklace of many coloured lights shone pensively.

The Damezan man shivered. He said it was going to be icy weather for Christmas.

What Christmas festival is that? thought the geneticist. It must have been a slip of his tongue; he was thinking of the festival of Babel. We are now in a Tower of Babel during the earliest phase of its construction.

A gust galloped over the wide open space, hurling whirlwinds of millennial grit.

Walking backwards so as to talk more easily, Iturribe pointed out that the night lacked the din of the pile's fan to make it a real Damezan night.

"It's been stopped for several days now, so I oughtn't to notice it," he explained, and his voice had a warm tone. "It's your presence that has made me pay such attention."

André restrained himself from asking if it was because something had gone wrong. It was good to let a man decide for himself how much he could say.

The whistling of a jet aeroplane tingled in the sky.

6

JACQUES BOUSSOT PICKED UP THE TELEPHONE AND TOLD HIS secretary he did not wish to be disturbed. The reply was inaudible; abruptly the engineer bent his head and muttered into the mouth-piece, "Yes, of course . . ."

After locking up some files and offering cigarettes (which his visitor quickly declined) he asked if M. Thomas-Laborde would like to put him any questions at once.

"It is true that you work under Monsieur Renoir's orders?"

The man had not turned a hair. While his right hand doodled with a fine blue pencil, he answered that his only real chief was M. Launay, the Director of the Centre. But that did not prevent M. Renoir, who was the permanent delegate of *his* chief, M. Aubier, from possessing, in virtue of that, a right of control over the working of *A*; and this, in practice, gave him a certain authority in the Service.

During this carefully phrased and calmly delivered statement the two men examined each other without concealment. Each of them, to his surprise, found in the other's face that of a friend and colleague.

But Boussot reminded himself that André and Mme Renoir's gallant were one and the same person. He was afraid of betraying Michel.

"It must seem to you," he went on in what he tried to make a disagreeable tone of voice, "that we're badly organized, seeing that the responsibilities overlap. There is, of course, no reason why you should know that there's such an atmosphere of mutual confidence among us here that there's never any friction."

The geneticist had nodded. But almost at once he suspected a trap.

"It merely seems to me," he said with a smile, "that you and Michel Renoir must be a pair of excellent friends."

"We get on well," murmured the other disconcerted. He stood up. "You'd like to visit the pile, I expect."

"One minute."

The words came from André, and he was surprised at his own boldness. Some force was pushing him on.

"I would like you to tell me where, and why, Monsieur Michel Renoir has been hiding since this morning."

Boussot had sat down again. He began without conviction to tell the official lie. He was cut short by a juvenile burst of laughter.

"Let me be quite plain," said his visitor in explanation, "and let's put our cards on the table. Do you imagine Michel—you know his brutal directness—would have asked me to be the godfather of one of his daughters if I hadn't been a very reliable friend of his?"

The engineer clumsily pulled out his lighter. He lit a cigarette. What a boring and ridiculous situation he had allowed himself to be pushed into! He hated games of concealment. At that moment Michel was in the next room; indeed it was to him, not to his secretary that he had telephoned at the beginning of the conversation.

Obviously this godfather story sounded odd. But the relations between Michel and his wife were still so obscure. Boussot went back over the night of the accident to the pile and the confidences—both too precise and too vague—which he had received then.

Should he open the door and call Michel? Friendship demands that one should put up a fight. When one has had, oneself, the luck to meet a wife with whom, after the indispensable upsets, the way of life stretches ahead so straight through joys and sorrows, one must of course try to save a family that is breaking apart.

"I confess," he said slowly, "that I have been obliged to lie to you. I know where Michel is. I haven't the right to tell you. It is for you two, alone, to attack the difficulties there seem to be between you."

He made a pause. He dared not pass on too quickly to the visit to the reactor. But already, with a worried expression, he was standing up.

He was not looking at André, who had taken out his notecase.

"Please give this to Michel," said the geneticist. "It's a letter from Madame Renoir to her son. I had promised to put it into his

own hands, but I see I was indulging in illusions. Michel knows the art of secrecy, and he is well backed up."

Boussot, embarrassed, held the long blue envelope on end in front of him between his two hands. The words '*For M. Michel Renoir*' in Juliette's large handwriting affected him painfully, for the child had the same Christian name as his father and it was impossible to dissociate the two. For a long time the scientist had been accustomed to refer to his son as 'the junior'. A Michel Renoir all the same! Charged, no doubt, for his mother's heart, with the same storms as his father . . . A round hand, distant and blank, such as was no doubt taught in upper-class girls' schools . . . But what right had he to dare assume that it was the hand of an unfeeling woman?

"I'd prefer it if you'd take this letter back," he confessed wearily. "Post it, along with a word from you, to our friend. Isn't that the straightest and kindest way of helping him?"

"No," replied André. It was like a verdict. "I don't think I'm mistaken in saying that Michel, this very second, is quite close to us, physically. I imagine he has taken refuge behind one of those doors. It will cost you only two or three steps!"

Boussot and Thomas-Laborde looked each other straight in the eye. The engineer's lips quivered slightly. But nothing would have induced him to lie any more. He did not answer.

"You will explain to Michel," André went on, "that I don't permit myself to judge him. I simply believe he is making a mistake."

Boussot nodded approval. He was being given a singular commission, and Michel would lose his temper, but good heavens! He bent down and put the letter in a drawer.

"And now," he announced, with the cheerfulness of a guide, "let's go and see the pile. She must be getting impatient."

"No," snapped André once more.

"No," he repeated. He drew his chair up to the desk, on which he laid a notebook and a pen, as though preparing to take down evidence.

Up to now, he said firmly, his visit had brought him nothing but a series of setbacks. Impossible to see Michel. And, in the circumstances, impossible to see M. Launay. And on all essential

questions the charming M. Iturribe displayed a discretion that was enough to drive one to despair.

But why be annoyed at that? Destiny, he added, gazing at his host, seemed to be granting him ample compensation. Questioning M. Jacques Bousso^t was really, was it not, like questioning Michel Renoir?

Then he asked point-blank :

"I suppose you're a Catholic?"

Bousso^t mastered a feeling of exasperation.

"I have no reason to conceal it from you," he said.

"Then you won't refuse your help to an enquiry which is inspired solely by the desire to defend human beings. I am not a Catholic, I haven't . . . that luck : but I respect your religion. I'm not saying it to give you pleasure : I believe . . . I shall end by belonging to it one day."

In spite of his natural calmness and of a sudden feeling of something like friendship towards his visitor, the engineer drummed a military march on his desk, with both hands. He had never been afraid of taking the responsibilities he knew were his own, but he refused to encroach on someone else's domain.

"I will telephone Monsieur Cahuzac, the Head of the Security Service," he said suddenly. "If he's in his office, I'll take you there. For a geneticist he is the 'right man'—not the reactor's mechanic."

André put out a hand to stop Bousso^t from lifting the instrument :

"Are you so afraid of being obliged to lie?"

The engineer shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"Can you give me an assurance that this Monsieur Cahuzac, if he is a Christian, will try to live his Christianity as much as you do? And that he is bound to Michel by a friendship as strong as yours? Without these guarantees I reject your offer."

Bousso^t's hand signified that it was ready to let go of the receiver, and André's grasp relaxed.

The man of Damezan had now no choice but to submit to the attack.

"I'll pass over my sympathy for atomic work, which is very great," said André quietly. "And over my admiration for the work

you are getting through here: which is also very great . . . You know the terrible dangers which are attached to nuclear energy. Can you, in accordance with your conscience as a Christian, assure me that all the necessary precautions are taken at the Damezan Centre?"

"I think," said Boussot, "I honestly can."

There was a silence. They looked each other in the eye. In spite of their mutual sympathy? or because of it?

"Yes," the engineer went on, "all possible precautions are taken—therefore, on the human plane, all necessary ones. We are aware that certain scientific data still escape us, and there are also such things as individual imprudences, but I must, first and foremost, reassure you: we haven't the Frankenstein mentality with which many people reproach us; although, in our field, theoretical discoveries seem to be progressing like a flash, in practice we take each fresh step that we dare to take with the greatest prudence, like mountaineers. No, truly, we are not madmen."

He picked up the receiver, for the telephone was ringing.

It was a call from the guards at the gate, to say that Mlle Girardot was waiting for M. Thomas-Laborde. The geneticist might speak to his friend. The expression '*ma chérie*', which he hardly ever used ordinarily, came naturally to his lips: telephoning on one of Damezan's internal telephone lines caused him an unforeseen emotion. This conversation with Boussot, with its warm confidence. There were men living here who were real men with their fleshly and spiritual dramas, their pettinesses and magnificent gifts. No, not merely machines.

"Give me half an hour, *ma chérie*. The car has a heater. *Je vous embrasse*. I'll tell you about my visit."

He hung up and glanced at the engineer who was smoking impassively. Their intimacy had just been further increased.

At the Geneva Congress on nuclear energy, he resumed at once, he had heard certain foreign nuclear scientists use words that betrayed a cold-bloodedness so monstrous that, from that moment, he had become afraid. Was it to be believed—even if, to a scientist, a fact as such should never be shocking—that grave gentlemen stuffed with technical know-how could constitute themselves the defenders of mental diseases caused by radio-activity and capable of attacking nine-tenths of the human race because, so they thought, the proportion of Einsteins and Beethoven's

in the remaining tenth might reach an extraordinary level.

Boussot had read these statements in an article. He lowered his eyes. To think that it was colleagues of his who had had such horrible thoughts . . .

But André had not stopped :

"You have compared your practice with that of mountaineers. You know, as I do, that the best Alpine climbers sometimes put a foot wrong, and, if I have understood you rightly, you don't exclude in your own case, either, on your plane of action, the possibility of putting a foot wrong, but—"

The telephone rang, and his face showed annoyance. Boussot thought it best to take off the receiver and put it down again as quickly as possible.

"—but when you put a foot wrong, catastrophes result ! And so I must ask you : is an event like the one that happened recently at Windscale in Great Britain conceivable at Damezan, or not?"

The ringing of the telephone seemed to the engineer delicious. He took it up and said : "Boussot," in the most official manner imaginable. After all, it might be Launay. Or the guards again.

Michel's voice. Being now alone, since the secretary had just left he was becoming furious. "Don't trust that Thomas-Laborde, he's an old woman and a double agent. And a bastard, you only have to look at him. He has descended on us because he's being pushed by an intriguing woman whose niece he's busy seducing. What the hell are you two up to? Don't trust him, old man. I give you five minutes to pack him off where he belongs, at the end of that time I'm off. And if that's what you prefer, let me tell you things won't be the same between us ever again."

"Listen !"

The other had hung up. Boussot read in his visitor's pensive eyes that he had understood practically everything. Without needing to hear Michel's voice . . . What a damned mix-up—the strike, the pile not working, the government going to pot and these two intelligent men wasting their time abusing one another . . . An intriguing woman's niece—what did that mean anyhow? . . . They might just as well talk about Windscale !

"You asked me a question," he said firmly, "about the possibility of certain catastrophes at Damezan. I can answer you directly : those catastrophes are inconceivable here."

Was he lying? He could not have told. The need to believe what he said was ingrained in him.

"May I ask on what your opinion is based?"

"It's quite simple . . ."

As he uttered the adjective, he could feel in his mouth the brackish taste of the air they had breathed in that room during a certain night, a discreet reminder, which he alone could recognize, as St. Peter the cockcrow. But already he had gone on :

"We are not judges of what happens at Windscale. Whereas we see every day the precautions we take. And we have never suffered any grave accidents."

He fell silent. In his mouth, again, that slimy, sickly taste.

The geneticist pondered, looking towards the window. A good part of the other's argument seemed to be summed up in a single sentence: "We haven't had any grave accidents, therefore catastrophes are impossible"—a puerile piece of induction. But could one attack this weakness? The man who had spoken, and who lived in the daily company of strange machines and furious dangers, had nothing puerile about him . . . Was not the sheathing of a thought in words even more difficult than the enchasing of one metal in another?

"I admire your certainty," he said without bringing his eyes back to Bousso's face. "I suppose it is better things should be like that."

The engineer bit his lip. Still that taste of an old bitterness.

"One other thing," he muttered, "courage isn't lacking here. I have seen amazing things."

He fell silent. He felt relieved at having said that.

André, turning his head stared at him. Might not the two short sentences which the man had just uttered have served as the starting point of a fresh discussion? It would have been unfair.

Slowly he closed his notebook and put it in his pocket. He stood up.

"You're a fine chap and I'm grateful to you. I'm very glad to have met you."

Bousso looked at the floor in embarrassment.

"Don't suppose," the geneticist went on, "that I'm blarneying you! Perhaps I shall never see you again, but I shall sometimes think of you."

Boussot still remained silent. He had no doubt of the other's sincerity, but he was thinking that at Damezan they expressed themselves more simply.

André took him by both hands. While he was still hesitating, he heard himself speaking. If Boussot, who lived at Arles, was free that evening at about ten o'clock, why shouldn't they meet there? No, no, he didn't want to put the man of Damezan through it. Simply to exchange ideas. And besides, there was the problem of Michel.

7

WAS BOUSSOT SEEING STRAIGHT? TEARS SHONE IN MICHEL'S eyes when, sitting in front of the secretary's typewriter, he looked up.

"I've brought you this for your son."

Michel took the letter and put it into one of his pockets without a word.

"Things not going well?"

"Not too well," Michel admitted with an unaccustomed frankness.

The engineer was beginning to be anxious when a smile lit up his friend's face.

"Better now, all the same," he said gently . . . He said no more. He would have blushed to confess that he had nearly touched the bottom of despair.

At the beginning of the afternoon Boussot, Warzyck, Laroche, Genaille and he had met in his office. In two short hours all the decisions involved in restarting the pile had been taken.

Wasn't that the type of what a working session should be? As Michel recognized in spite of himself, the results were less important than the atmosphere. As for that, he had been struck by the way their minds had kept at full stretch, and however much he told himself that he was responsible for this atmosphere, he still felt obliged to believe that his colleagues, those hardened technicians, would never have taken the line of systematic

pessimism had they not recognized the fundamental rightness of the principle of dissatisfaction.

Would it not have been the moment for Michel, who was in the chair, to announce that he had worked out a better alarm system? . . . But how could one present to serious men, as a discovery, something that remained a hypothesis?

The pile would restart; but once again they would have to live in constant expectation of its oddities. All those rude blows, like the jerky temper of some capricious person, which resulted from the normal, terrible play of great forces in confrontation . . . For the apparent running-amok of a machine takes place within the logic of a certain number of laws, and a man has only the feebleness of his imagination to blame. Western scientists have gone a long way to find a strange word to express these setbacks whose precise shapes escape them: *avatar*. In Sanskrit it means the metamorphosis of a divinity; could it not, to a modern scientific brain, express the metamorphosis of a hope?

The healing power of words has its limits. The disappointed heart is never done with experience and with savouring humiliation.

Boussot had been the first to leave—followed almost at once by the three men from Saclay, who had to get to Nouvillargues and begin their report: that evening, at Arles, they would take the night train for the capital.

Michel had rung up Jean Aubier, to give him the results of the meeting. Sitting at his desk with a cigarette in his hand, he had been dreaming for about a minute when, according to the instructions given the night before, he had been rung up from the guard post—to say that M. Iturribe was taking M. Thomas-Laborde 'round the site'. This gentleman had arrived at Darnèze with one Mlle Girardot, to whom M. Iturribe had refused entry.

The Chayriguès niece! That dark girl who had complimented the geneticist so stupidly! And whom Muller had accompanied to a night club! That man Thomas-Laborde was insatiable. He liked them fresh into the bargain—why, he was twelve or thirteen years older than his wench . . . Let's not insist on the freshness: niece to a woman like the Chayriguès implied, obviously, somebody ripe.

Alone in the large room and no longer aware of its smell of

tobacco, Michel had begun his favourite practice of striding up and down. He had just been bitten by jealousy.

Ripe? A fine criticism! As if little Françoise would not have been the better for deserving that adjective a little! When a man had remained chaste as he had for several months, hadn't he the right to kick over the traces once or twice? She said no. Though not frigid, she was still pursued, in the midst of pleasure, by an unconquerable feeling of anguish.

She blamed her old illness for it. Come, come! It was religion that was at fault.

"It's wrong to love each other like this," she had also said. "A scientist like you!"

Was he moving towards a second mortification, an even more bitter one?

Could women never understand?

As if things were ever simple! He loved that frail little Françoise, and he longed to defend her, even against himself. She was better than he. So straightforward. He had thought at first that it was from ignorance that she failed to take certain precautions, but he was wrong: she desired a child of his, one that would take after him. If Juliette had desired children, she had never revealed what she wished to find in them; obviously the ideal portrait of the boys and girls fashionably admired in the best Parisian neighbourhoods.

There was no ulterior motive in Françoise. Besides being wise she was dreamy, and calmly allowed the nights and days to succeed one another.

She had forbidden him, rather sharply, to say anything against Juliette in her presence.

A teacher with a firm will seconded by a marvellous patience: never had the child's notebooks been so neat. Even his writing was changing, becoming more intelligent.

Michel ought to have asked her if she was fond of her pupil; he had not dared. He thought this was because he did not want to bring pressure on her feelings: wasn't it that he was afraid of appearing ridiculous? He had asked her to treat the boy firmly, what more did he want? As for Michel junior, every time his father asked him about Françoise he replied, in a neutral tone, that she was 'very nice'.

And I, Michel thought, am I fond of my son? After having done his best to destroy the boy's exuberance, he was irritated by his coldness. He had felt like hitting him . . . A new respect had restrained him.

Never had he given so much attention to the brat, trying to foresee his reactions like those of a pile.

That word again! Nuclear energy found its perch everywhere! Even in Françoise, who was taking a passionate interest in the work of the Centre. She was mugging up physics textbooks and encouraging Michel to make his son into a nuclear researcher or technician. But also, with the tenacity of which some women possess the secret, and which in her case was reinforced by the instincts of her profession and by the peasant stock she came of, she arrogated to herself the right to give him, at any moment, a pin-prick about 'the bomb'. Old Ludovic had tied a candle to his tail, and he could not shake it off. It was intolerable to hear her attack this vast subject with small feminine words, which were so inadequate. She claimed the right to know whether he would have the heart to assist in the making of an atomic bomb—A or H. A bomb! They had other fish to fry when the reactors went wrong or there was a strike on the building-sites! People who are in the thick of things, at grips with one another and with the fury of reality, are done for if they try asking themselves questions about the legitimacy of their actions—on the pretext that, from one remote consequence to another remoter one, one of their actions may bring about some disastrous event . . . Done for, no other word!

"Two million hectares were contaminated by deadly, or at any rate very dangerous, radioactivity after the explosion of the H-bomb at Bikini," she reminded him with anguished eyes.

"Bikini is the name of a charming kind of bathing-dress," he growled.

"Have you seen about this protest march by a whole crowd of English people against the bomb?"

"A crowd? You're being too kind to a handful of good people. Even the Labour Party isn't worrying the government."

He would have to put a stop to these skirmishes. One of these days he would lose his temper.

And then the telephone had rung.

It was Laroche, speaking from Nouvillargues. Without a word of excuse he was proposing to go back on one of the decisions taken half an hour earlier.

The anger which had been rising in Michel's heart exploded. Were they weathercocks or men? he shouted, these horn-mad half-wits who spent their time masturbating with a pile. He would tell them what they could do with their plan to alter things! He would tell them! What was decided was decided . . . The more he shouted, the more clearly he could see himself back in Muller's office on the evening of the Chàyriguès dinner: that time he, Michel, now apparently an opponent of change, had been the one proposing a modification.

Was it the tact of an understanding colleague? Or simply the law of the pendulum? As soon as Michel had finished his stream of insults, Laroche went straight on, calmly, with what he had to say. Michel, he said, would soon realize. The proposal hadn't even the merit of being eccentric. In the last publication from the Oak Ridge Centre one of the American physicists had described a . . .

And Michel did not interrupt. He listened. And in fact he did realize. As far as a technician's prudence could see, Laroche's idea was excellent . . . He had accepted it without argument, in a few clear sentences.

He too had said not a word of excuse, but his cheeks were burning. He realized painfully how far he was from being a universal man. His imagination had not hit on the idea Laroche had discovered. And, to begin with, he had failed to keep cool, a thing that would never have happened to a man like Launay in a scientific discussion, and then, secondly . . .

He ought to have plunged into work to forget the scene, but his brain felt empty. A report lay there just by his hand, but sitting crouched in front of his desk, he did not even put out a hand to it. He had not heard Mme Vauvert come in, bringing him two letters to sign.

Standing on the other side of the desk, an image of grace and gentle kindness, she gazed at him in silence. Without her peaceful breathing one would have said she had ceased to live. The weight of her body rested on her right leg, which was drawn slightly backwards, and her left knee, motionless, brought out the careful pleats in her navy-blue skirt.

But the man looked at her face, and all he noticed there was its deep, beautiful and absurd expression of pity. How he detested that! Better, a thousand times, disdain or hatred! He reflected that, without distinguishing the words, his secretary must have heard the violence of his voice on the telephone. And that she now saw him looking miserable . . . Cuckolded in his home and in his work!

"Get out. Haven't you noticed that I've work on hand? You never had any psychological sense."

Three sentences. Three blows.

Trembling and with scarlet cheeks, she had flung the letters on the desk and run to the door . . .

He had remained transfixed for a few seconds, then he rushed out into the passage. His temples were throbbing. He was grinding his teeth. There was one idea in his head: to get to Bousso's office. He was bareheaded, with no overcoat, and the cold outside had taken his breath away. On his arms and on his legs he received the heavy, icy waves of the mistral. The night was pure, it was simple and healthy, strong and young, while he, poor idiot . . .

But that was over.

Everyone is overcome by fatigue sometimes.

Pile *A* would restart. The strike at *B* and *C*, if treated with disdain, would perhaps stop of its own accord.

In a lonely house a trusting young woman was waiting . . .

Bousso went with Michel to the door. He had just said that he was seeing the geneticist again that evening, and his friend had not protested—had merely made it clear that he would not join them.

"Isn't there any message you'd like me to give him? Not even simply to thank him? He brought a letter——"

"—addressed to my son. Michel junior will decide after he's read it. All I see in this move is common-or-garden meddlesomeness. The chap shoves his nose in everywhere: at Damezan, and into my family. Has——"

With a friendly "Come, come," Jacques clapped him on the shoulder. Michel's face relaxed. He burst out laughing . . .

When he was alone again, the engineer looked among his papers

for a tiny black wooden crucifix which a drunken docker had given him in an Italian port. He gazed on it.

He was amazed and dismayed, shocked and alarmed by Michel's violence, but, with all that, he considered him admirable. An ore that contains a bit of everything, and without which great works of men could not be built.

The woollen head-scarf and the overcoat had disappeared from the peg, and the large black leather handbag was no longer under the table. Bravo. That would make his intended excuses easier. He could reproach Mme Vauvert for going off before the proper time.

He took up the telephone to ring Launay's secretary. The number was engaged. Naturally. Oh, well. Since four that afternoon he had not been able to find out anything about the Director's negotiations, and he would remain in his ignorance until next morning; but he felt he had the right, that evening, to put the restoration of order in his life as a man before his professional curiosity (which could only gain from the process) . . . He was not betraying. He never would.

The road to the lonely house was not long. The yearned-for light was shining behind the shutters, a warm and vibrant symbol, as the pile's fan would be on the morning of its rebirth . . . In the Rue Raynouard did he ever now think of looking up at the windows? And that impetuous steel-cold mistral, fantastic hurler of sand and bits of grass, yet respectful towards the old and happy house! Like some monster out of the 'Golden Legend', still noisy and strong after the hermit or the knight had subdued it, but now inwardly won over to obedience.

He was no longer afraid to remind himself of his moment of collapse. To think that Françoise, that admirable person, had nearly committed suicide!

The union of two human beings cannot possess nuclear purity. Evil memories are bound to creep into its cement.

They kissed.

"Is the strike nearly over?" she asked.

"If you've read a paper you know the answer."

She looked at him thoughtfully and murmured:

"That poor man, Launay, with all those worries!"

For already—and certainly Juliette would not have felt the need—she knew by name all the actors in the drama.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s a man.”

“A man”—what an ambiguous cliché! As he spoke it he had turned away. What dross and mediocrities and horrors lay hidden by that solemn flag! How much easier it was to probe the heart of a machine than that of a man . . .

But are you being sincere, Michel Renoir? Are you representing a reactor as you know it? . . .

“I’ll go and see my son,” he muttered, glad to change the subject.

“All right.”

Michel junior was sitting at the table in his room, reading *Six Semaines en Ballon*. He stood up, shut his eyes, and waited for his father to come over and kiss him. When at last he opened them he saw, laid in front of him, the long maternal envelope. His quivering fingers gripped the letter.

“Let that wait. I want to talk to you. Sit down.”

Sit down while your father starts pacing up and down to gather his words together—but how dark what he ought to say remains! Isn’t this house a lovely one? Don’t you work here much better than in Paris? Wouldn’t you like to live here? Aren’t you getting attached to this firm and charming young woman who runs life here? Do you really need to go back to Paris to compare the two?—Yes, of course . . . But that’s no good. The right end to begin is Françoise. She’s the one to be convinced. The boy will always fall in with what’s decided—he isn’t qualified to know what’s best for him . . .

Michel, who had not uttered a word, went to the door and out, with an inscrutable face. It did not occur to him that he was leaving behind him a bewildered child, who was quite unable to start reading again. Who listened for every sound.

The comedy of the meal shared by the three was soon over. The child sat hunched in his chair and was careful not to fidget while Michel, full of his subject, talked of the strike with a great wealth of detail. The mistral could be heard howling like a dog which a family has turned out because it is too old. In Françoise’s fine eyes gleams and shadows came and went without cease, unnoticed by ‘the man’: he was speaking of the work on *B*, but his secret

thoughts moved on to pile *F*, which would combine a remarkable English discovery of about six months ago with an ingenious improvement realized by the people at Châtillon and confirmed less than a week ago . . . And even these novelties would already have become stale . . . *F* would be a reactor so much more brilliant.

As they folded their napkins the man said the ritual phrases :

"Now go and sleep, old man. I'll have a cup of coffee and be off to my Nouvillargues. See you tomorrow. Work hard . . ."

If his father went off to his Nouvillargues every evening, why did one never hear his car start up? A Vedette's engine makes a noise. A noise which it's fun to wait for and to hear.

That clever scientist Michel Renoir had not foreseen this objection. He noticed with joy that Françoise and the child had just embraced. As she caressed the small smooth forehead, the young woman seemed to feel some embarrassment; it would surely vanish.

The place of evening retreat was not Nouvillargues, but a small, comfortable, warm room which had been rearranged, leading out of Françoise's large room and kept locked by her during the day. In the morning Michel always went away before his son awoke.

They entered their refuge—Michel carrying the coffee tray and Françoise some books. Great gusts enveloped the house. That simple violence did one's heart good.

Yes. But in this intimate atmosphere the question of the bomb would certainly come up again. The morning papers had published dispatches from America according to which, after the last atomic explosion in the U.S.S.R., the radioactivity of the air over Western Europe had increased considerably.

He spoke first. "I've been thinking, we ought to get married."

She turned pale and stood up, but he too stood up and made her sit down again. From his chair (in this narrow room the bed made it impossible to stride up and down to any purpose) he delivered a monologue, constructing hastily with gestures and words a future that did not hold water. He would ask for a divorce, wouldn't he? Marrying a divorced man presented no problem to an agnostic schoolteacher. Juliette wouldn't refuse

them the custody of Michel junior. Their happy life would continue. If they had a child they would make room for him.

Françoise hid her face in her hands. She was weeping silently.

What could he add?

"I'm not the man," he said, "to stop you from taking up your profession again. As you know, I'm too fond of the idea that everyone should stick to his job. The choice will be entirely yours."

She went on weeping. He moved over to her, lifted her up and took her on his knees, like a child. She buried her head in the hollow of the man's shoulder. Michel had never seen weeping like this (Juliette's tears were distinguished ones, which dried immediately), and he felt at one and the same time a tender astonishment and a heavy uneasiness.

He felt silent.

Neither of them heard footsteps in the large room beyond the door.

"He's in a bad way," muttered Bousso, "but I don't think one can help him from outside. He's got to defend himself. He's the secret kind."

The establishment known as the Café de la Régence (whose dusty corners had perhaps felt the weight of the pitying curiosity of the gaze of Van Gogh) was full of noise and smoke and people in overcoats drinking mulled wine or grogs. The train for Paris had just left Arles. It had carried off with it the Members of Parliament, the Saclay men, some commercial travellers, some soldiers, a bull-fighter and some music-hall artists. In the small city forgetful of its great history and now beginning to drowse, such night life as there was took the form of this unpolished and soulless gathering. It was the hour when, on the newspaper presses, the colour of tomorrow was being prepared. The government had fallen, what else might be going to fall?

Two old men with pointed beards had uttered the name Daladier. A lad of seventeen laughed in their faces. Who might that Pasha be?

André gave the engineer a friendly look. The man's long face would leave him an extremely fine last image to carry away from that tumultuous day, on which he had seen so many new things and fervently debated the essential problems.

A whole tableful of men laughed in chorus because the President of the Friends of the Camargues, misled by the insufficient light, had trumped a knave instead of a king.

Into the din the geneticist slipped a confidence: "You said 'from outside,'" he whispered. "I imagine, for you, there is still prayer."

Boussot narrowed his eyes and did not answer.

"Between your Christian belief," André went on, "and your profession, don't you ever feel as if you were between the tree and its bark? Are you really always easy in your mind?"

"Look here," said the engineer, "I don't like big words. Don't force me to explain to you that a human being hasn't the right—ever—to feel completely at ease!"

"A pity."

From the direction of the station, where he had gone to collect his fresh wares, a newspaper-vendor, whose cap, satchel and sweater bore the names of three different firms, was passing along the avenues with his red nose on fire. His shouts were incomprehensible, but it was perfectly possible to read, from a long way off, the huge and thick headlines of the Marseille evening paper he brandished in front of him. The fall of the government and the forecasts for the next. A sordid murder—three suspects—in the hills about La Sainte Baume. Protest by American atomic scientists against the dangers of radioactivity.

"There you are, on the carpet," said André quietly.

"That happens every day now, I no longer pay any attention," Boussot replied calmly. "We're such convenient scape-goats."

Two men playing belota had interrupted their game, to hail the newspaper-seller. Once of them bought the Marseille paper, which he opened wide at the racing page, with a noisy movement; the other, a weekly, at whose back page he gazed fixedly, with his face all screwed up: it was an immodest and ridiculous advertisement for a woman's pink and white girdle.

For all his indulgent nature, André felt ill at ease: this city was too much in contradiction with the superb landscapes hidden by the night. There still rang in his ears Christiane's expressions of delight: on leaving the Camargue she had managed to reach the Pont du Gard before twilight was over; against the faultless

texture of a velvety golden sky it had stood out as a majestic symbol of a past which still refused itself the right to die.

"The Church," he said, "has put its money on technical progress. Beware of treacherous comebacks! You, in particular, the Christians of the atom, should be seeking to make sure whether technical progress isn't, in its daily applications, what they call a whited sepulchre: the provincial café that invests in new chairs and a dazzling zinc counter, but still has unspeakable lavatories. Modern culture has quite rightly been satirized for its superficiality. You may well ask yourselves whether what we see today, under the name of an extension of culture, isn't simply an increase of this monstrosity. There'll come a time when only exceptionally gifted heads will be able to accept life on my terms—to be at one and the same time with the Sputnik and with the Parthenon. Already, even a Lord Russell allows himself to minimize Shakespeare and Michelangelo on the pretext that they made no change in the world's material evolution. Quite the opposite of a Volta, a Fermi or an Einstein, who must be regarded at the greatest of the great. I ask you—and urgently—let's protest against such stupid allotting of good and bad marks. Intelligence is beyond price in its own field. Who will be able to say which did the more for the happiness of other people—Van Gogh or Einstein? . . . Let's protest while we still have time—while we're still not finally dazed by the terrifying onrush of big-bang maniacs to whom the great powers are yielding, with their more and more filthy bomb explosions."

He stopped and felt embarrassed. He was not a speechifier and the realistic words scorched his mouth. But he expected a reply.

The first one to come arose, abruptly and mockingly, from the room itself—a tune on the accordion, hurled out from the hideous mass of an automatic machine, with the rhythm and din of a low dance-hall. It bored its way through the convolutions of one's brain. But the locals did not object. The President of the Friends of the Camargue had recognized the tune. Raising his old felt hat he winked at the girl at the cash desk.

"If you're not afraid of the cold," said Boussot, exasperated for his companion's sake, "I suggest we go out. We could finish the conversation as we walk along."

THE MISTRAL FROM THE REMOTEST AGES, SEETHING OVER THE dark-bound town with magnificent violence, made the plan an inhuman one. The two men, huddled close and obeying a simple instinct, had managed to reach the lighted windows of a shop that was preparing its Christmas display; but no puff of warmth came to them from the row of bulbs or from the unsubtle celluloid toys. They stood close against the window, shivering and listening to the howlings and whistlings of the gusts that pursued their battle across the nearby square and down the streets.

Boussot's car became the refuge. The engineer started it and, when it was well warmed, drew up between two plane-trees in an ancient avenue.

"Progress is some good, after all, isn't it?" he asked, smiling.

André also smiled, but refused to give in. He said that civilization must have softened them.

The engineer made no reply. But he found it hard to imagine the cave-men, in spite of their fleeces of hair, walking along the banks of the Rhône during a December night with the mistral at full strength. To every age its tools and its laws!

The huge procession of gusts rushed over the sky. From a church belfry there came the swollen sound of a bell.

In the opaque darkness, through which the noise of the wind snored, the child had stealthily descended the stairs. There were dozens of small things in that frightening house which he had secretly tried hard to get to know: the electric light switches, the nails on which keys were hung. He had found by experiment that with care he could open and close the front door without making it squeak or bang.

Later he would have a landmark to guide him. The angelic face of Fabienne, Arnaud's sister, a little girl with large dark plaits and blue velvet trousers—she too did not go to school and she came to play with him in the afternoons. He had guessed that she would do whatever he wanted. It would be enough to find her

house (she said she lived a kilometre away) and to shout her name in the night, for her to come out with her basket under her arm, quite ready. She would guide him to a main road leading to Paris. Michel had slipped two thousand-franc notes into his right sock. They would hitch-hike and, a few hours later, would land at the Porte d'Auteuil . . .

But now a torrential horde of icy air, lashing at his legs, nearly sent him sprawling on the floor and whirled about the hall with a wild roar—on and on and on.

He hadn't suspected the existence of such turbulent savagery. This must be what the children here call 'mistral'.

It would be terrible to pass through a kilometre of blackness in this countryside not subdivided into familiar places.

And, all alone, one would never manage to come out alive from this cold.

With an effort that hurt his arms and chest the boy slowly closed the door again. Tears ran down his cheeks—it was the burning of the wind that had caused them.

Upstairs, in the small room, where Françoise, after their embrace, had slipped into a deep first sleep, she suddenly turned over and cried out. "Did you hear something?"

"The wind on the stairs," said the man, stroking her hand. "Go to sleep. It's so good, here together. Just be happy."

She returned his caress, and sleep had again begun to flood through her.

"I must have been dreaming," she murmured.

"I expect so."

He had not been asleep but had heard nothing. He had been thinking of pile *F* and of the team of men at the Châtillon Centre.

These feminine organisms are as sensitive as electric particles.

He half sat up to embrace her : but as he bent over her he perceived the remote and regular sound of her breathing, like a light beating of oars over a calm sea. He listened. The woman sleeping there so sweetly would not be able to refuse to be happier still. That evening he had avoided answering : such a question sounds overpowering the first time; but he would ask it again tomorrow and the day after—as often as was necessary—and he would win her over. Win fruitful joy for the two of them.

He stretched out his long robust legs noiselessly and the whistling climax of a squall made him think, with its untamed energy, of the thousands of discoveries awaiting the scientists. The Japanese had, for some years, been making up for lost ground in an amazing way. One would have to cling on tightly if France was to keep her fourth place in the nuclear field. Well, one would cling on tightly.

Boussot liked to think of himself as an intermediary chief, acting and obeying, in accordance with the ideal of the centurion in the Gospel. He tended to forget that there was also in him a man of reflection and prayer, and that he would have something to say.

Would the occasion produce the orator? His faith in his work had been challenged. The winter night; the invisible Rhône quite near; the car at rest in the furious wind which lashed at its coachwork and windows; the company of a genuine scientist, a brother in arms from another discipline; the worry over Michel and his secret difficulties.

Discovering himself gradually as he forced himself to turn his thought into words, the man explained humbly, in a jerky voice, the harmony of his exhausting existence. It was rather like making a confession, and like an invention in the making . . .

In the *Credo* he found, he said, God the Father addressed immediately as 'Maker . . . of all things visible and invisible'.

At the centre of the Mass there came the admirable cycle of operations of the Eucharist: the benediction, the breaking of bread, its distribution. Yes, it was in the middle that the breaking had its place: *fregit*, 'He broke'. Christ performs the breaking, not the fission of bread; but may one not believe (imagining a parable, the better to understand) that He wishes here to bless the fragmentation of matter, that essential introduction to the sharing which multiplies?

"Remember the disciples at Emmaus. It was by the breaking of the bread that they recognized Christ. In the image of the material sun, which is one of His works, the Light of Life really desired to depict Himself in the image of the need to burst out and disseminate His power in a generous explosion.

"Because men, in their hours of vicious mischief, have tried hard to sully the divine operation by introducing into it a germ of

hate, the word 'division' has taken on a detestable human meaning. Multiplication and division are, in fact, the two names of one and the same mechanism, the splendid fission of Unity on the march.

"I'm no theologian. All I'm confiding to you is a set of reveries. But I think they respect God and the task I carry out. Think of Pascal's phrase : 'I shed this drop of blood for you . . .'; a wonderful thinker there confirms that the total gift of being would seem to obey a scientific order.

"Wouldn't you be prepared to regard the Son and the Holy Spirit as isotopes of the Divinity? If only for a minute. Just as mass is energy, God—the final One in which an extraordinary and incalculable potential is gathered—is already, simply by the fact that He exists, an exchange, a circulation of forces.

"We have there a *leit-motif* of faith, of which what might seem to be the most sinister affirmations can still not help being joyful. The *Memento quia pulvis es et in pulverem reverteris* proclaims the physico-chemical unity of the cosmos. From that phrase it is natural to go on to the parable of the grain of mustard-seed, that exhilarating image of the power God has given to matter of multiplying nourishment and energy, as He Himself does in his miracles—the grain of mustard-seed, so tiny, but already the bearer of worlds.

"And the *Vere beata Nox* of the Pascal Vigil, in which, in the night of the death of God, the whole of the night of matter receives a benediction.

"I'm not trying to prove anything," Boussot murmured, "and I won't weary your ears any more—the mistral will see to that. But I can state that at Damezan I'm no exception in trying to think out our work; and that none of us behaves like an automaton.

"Material progress is too vast a subject, anyhow . . . What does it matter if you and I never meet again on this earth to discuss it? We are living sincere lives, and I think all sincere lives *meet* elsewhere. As you yourself said . . .

"When I stand in front of the reactor's charge-face, I think of Péguy and his masterly monotony. To me all those identical rods, balanced one against another, sing the virtues of number. Not the inorganic crowd but—if I may put it this way—the one-by-one of

human beings. Each of whom has the right to try to live according to the grace and truth of his nature. If that doesn't necessarily postulate the possession of a car and a washing-machine, it does mean for everyone a minimum quantity of material goods.

"The cosmic universe and the community of men are involved in that element which neither you nor I will ever see—which is so tiny that it would seem tactful to let it pass in silence rather than make fun of its small scale, and yet its fission raises mountains.

"I share your misgivings; but they co-exist with a great hope.

"Would you be willing to join me, once again, in considering Michel?"

At that same moment Launay turned out the tall lamp on his desk. There was not a loose paper left lying about anywhere. Yet a turnover of thousands of millions of francs, the extraction from the ground of thousands of millions of tons of ore and the sweat of thousands of working hours throughout the hot months had been determined by the firm and meticulous mind of a man who had been through two thick files once, and once only.

Now everything was methodically stacked in the drawers and on the shelves of the half-lit room, as well as in the galleries of his apt cranium. His footsteps moved away down a long corridor where the lights shone through the night.

Here too there was no trace of the discussions and the waiting, the rumours and sudden arrivals which had marked the day. Damezan at night was as clean as an electric machine. And yet it had been a day of exceptionally hard work, lived through, ever since the morning, in an atmosphere that savoured of stocktaking and alarm. A mysterious period was ending, another beginning. Launay recalled the night when the pile had caught fire.

The Director's car plunged headlong into the mistral, to receive the full fury of its buffetings as they struck and ricocheted off the coachwork with a noise like waves striking a jetty. The descent began, took shape . . . The long curve before the cross-roads . . . The dead olive tree. The green barrier and the sleeping houses of the first village.

The strike would last a further two months, he had prognosticated that morning. He saw no reason to go back on the figure. The government crisis—the *nth*—had revived too violently the

conflict which the experts had thought the Members of Parliament should be able to solve. A rise of prices was inevitable; it called in question all the figures.

Now that the files were closed, Launay, abandoning the ground to the night and to the wind and preparing his body for a brief sleep, considered with serenity the men who had taken up his time to get nowhere; two former doctors, two patriotic Members of Parliament.

This opinion was entirely private.

So was the muted feeling of brotherhood which M. Launay, that inflexible man, felt for two people whom he had treated roughly during the discussions. For he too had been forced, in the course of his life, to change direction. He had been told one day : 'Abandon your books, your apparatus, your pupils. Run Damezan.' It would be the first Damezan to exist. And none of the chiefs who were bringing pressure to bear upon him could, however intelligent, teach him the elements of a suitable method.

Unprecedented machines and a language of command had to be built up; a remote plateau cleared and an organization created : and feet firmly planted in the muddy slag and thought concentrated on the unreal plutonium. A work of madmen and Titans, of Roman legionaries and dishevelled artists.

But Damezan had come into being.

The memory of these Sisyphean adventures still haunted the place. As though the old genii of the soil of the Midi, still unconquered, were insinuating themselves there, behind masks. The initial work had been extremely hard; but the phase of industrial exploitation had now begun and, month by month, at a regular rate, the task was becoming still more complex.

The man who will hear the Director utter a real complaint has yet to be born.

As the car opened out into the long straight road after the level-crossing, on which whirlwinds of dust were at war, a gloved hand groped among the switches of its radio. A Bach fugue, once so dear to him—he must avoid that like a siren : it would reduce the cerebral tension. Now from the dashboard there fell words and phrases, solemn and vague like many which he had uttered today at Damezan . . .

'In Rome official circles express uneasiness at the crisis which has begun in Paris . . . In Washington Mr Dulles has seen our Ambassador. He has refused to make any statement, but it is believed . . .'

Enough of this talk.

The beam of the headlights touched a large newly-erected board : NOUVILLARGUES ZONE OF SILENCE. The inscription was not there yesterday. But the spirit of Damezan had breathed the word—Damezan, which changes roads into streets, olive orchards into building-sites, villages into towns, and which, massacring silence, immediately makes a longing for it arise in the old, simple and complicated hearts of wretched men.

9

IN THE CONTROL ROOM NOBODY SPOKE. THE ELECTRIC WALL-clock indicated eleven precisely.

Was there anyone present who could say for certain whether it was evening or morning?

Laroche, seated with a erudite air at the control desk, pushed his right sleeve aside from his wrist watch and let out a light sigh. He took off his horn-rimmed glasses, folded them up, and put them in his pocket. In his silence he looked like a blind man dreaming.

Were there still things that were not clear? Must they stop? Go over everything again? In one movement the man swung round on his stool. His eyes met Renoir's, who was standing behind him. A smile wrinkled the yellowed and stubbly face, one forearm moved slowly upwards and, at the level of the shoulder two long fingers made a satisfied and mocking V-sign.

Renoir winked. He turned to Warzyck.

"O.K."

With an oath Warzyck seized his mop of hair in his fist and shouted to Genaille and Boussot : "The old girl's on the job again !"

All the white overalls fluttered, came and went, clucked and

laughed. The jubilation when a pile was first set going was a far greater festival, but this was enough to make them very happy. Michel called for silence. The news must be communicated at once to Launay.

"Monsieur Launay? I am glad to inform you that the pile is working again. We have carried out all the tests, and all's well."

"Thanks for letting me know," replied an official voice. "I am too busy at this moment, otherwise I would have come down to you. I will telephone Paris. You can leave it to me to let Aubier know."

A slight dry cough indicated a fresh paragraph. (Forward march! Immediately after the short moment of relief, the long road and the care, as usual.)

"This afternoon and tomorrow," said the calm voice, "a full service will be required. I have no doubt the repairs have been properly done, but I know they are quite recent. We shall need to check up carefully whether our forecasts are correct. I will speak to Boussois. You can begin giving orders at once."

Well chosen words. But words which Michel had at once translated into obligations and servitudes. No possible doubt: most of the men surrounding him were about to find themselves deprived, at the last minute, of the long weekend to which their weariness had looked forward as a rightful deliverance. In the breach for more than a hundred and twenty hours on end! And just before Christmas!

Not even the balm of a word of congratulation to appease the bitterness. For the last week the Director had kept his compliments locked up. He was waiting for the pile really to pass its trials.

Michel could not summon up the courage to make any comment on the words which he transmitted, unchanged, to his team. He could understand the chief, and understand his colleagues; in his exhaustion all he desired was to escape.

"Ring up Martineau and let him know," he said, however, in a voice of assumed indifference, to the engineer of the pile.

Boussois smiled. To announce to the plutonium chief that *A* was again secreting, second by second, the marvellous mildew, was a joy that effaced more than half the overwork.

Michel opened the door leading to the gallery.

Ever since nine in the morning on Monday he had not allowed

himself to leave the Centre. He had set up home in his office, with a camp-bed and some rugs—a caricature of a bed—and even so he had not been able to lie down for more than three hours each night, with the lights full on and the telephone within reach, to snatch a feverish sleep conscious of so many menaces in ambush.

A real long haul, without any recourse to chemical stimulants. But suddenly his body was all in; he was on the edge of collapse.

News of Françoise and Michel junior had been brought him regularly by Mme Vauvert. Her chief had excused himself, the next day, for the unfortunate things he had said to her, and had sent her every evening to the lonely house. He had thus received from his mistress several letters, which he reproached himself for not having read: he had put them all together into an envelope, together with a letter from Juliette, also unopened. The desire to restart the pile had evidently reduced him to a kind of secondary condition—delivered him over, body and soul, to the magnetic fields of the invisible world.

The air outside hit him like a boxing-glove. The whole outside world amazed him—all this strange confusion of space and forms which continued to exist without turning a hair while such grave events were going on inside the machine-monuments. In spite of the warmth, he shivered. With his swollen fingers he tried to put up his coat collar and noticed that it was already done.

A low, heavy sky, festooned with greyish clouds, stood stagnant above the plateau. The tall top of the chimney was caught in them. Like a prisoner? Like a child at the breast?

A goods train was crawling across the plain.

With robot-like, emphatic, heavy steps he walked to his car. No thought was possible now except to rush towards sleep. He felt that, if he had fallen on the ground, he would have gone to sleep the next second, surrounded by the tumult of the fan as a wine-grower by the sound of the cicada . . . The first thing was to get to Françoise. He had no need of a driver: the pile would watch over his hands and his eyes till the last yard of the journey. She would speak a word for him in the ear of the obscure forces of the world, for she was not ungrateful. She knew to whom she was most in debt for that Herculean energy whose flux now wholly revived her: mustering her flesh and blood within the marvellous and terrifying skin. Deep in the night of her rods the new plutonium

was already stirring. Its atoms were coming to rest side by side, like secret consignments of explosives on a dockside.

Michel, after saying he would not touch any food, let himself be persuaded. On condition that Françoise would let him eat without saying a word and would come and lie beside him when he began to go off to sleep.

The venerable house was bathed in silence. About it the countryside lay still to the horizon, with the apparent immobility of a great mass of ore; and the young woman had wisely sent her pupil to spend the day with a neighbouring family.

When he had drunk his cup of coffee, she bent towards him and whispered, "Is the plant working again?" He opened his eyes wide and nodded, and she stroked his right hand.

He felt as if he had attained an absolute indifference to the flesh. Caresses? An old metaphysical concept. And yet, when they reached the little room which was their domain, it was he who clasped her to him and whose fingers found hers. A moment later he was asleep, with his hand in Françoise's hand.

He had asked her to wake him up at about seven that evening; she had pity on his exhaustion and waited two hours longer. In the meantime the boy had returned, accompanied by Fabienne's grandmother. Had he noticed his father's car on the road? She was unwilling to worry about this, and she put him to bed as quickly as possible.

Michel stretched, sat up and looked at his watch. He appeared surprised, but said nothing. The silence of the night seemed all-enveloping.

"Would you believe it," she said, "I slept a little? I thought at first it was just your example—but no, I was sleepy. And yet last night I had a very restful night."

Already quick, like his old self, to accuse women collectively of empty-headedness, he suffered at hearing her ramble like this. But then his eyes met hers, and an intuition struck him. He felt like laughing aloud. Yet why? There was nothing comic about the tenderness of the hope that dwelt in Françoise, like some long neglected piece of ground, from which harvests at last might arise.

And it was even finer than he had thought. As fine—who could tell?—as the joy of scientific discovery.

A plutonium of flesh and blood.

"I asked you a question," he murmured, "wouldn't this be a good time to answer it?"

Not yet. She had been an orphan and had practically no relatives, and she wanted time to think. That week she had consulted her best friends : old Father Maurier—who would be coming over almost at once—and the Abbé Chazelaud.

"Bringing an old parson into this affair ! I wonder what more she'd do if she were *not* an agnostic?" he growled.

She smiled, conscious of having proceeded to a kind of test. The Abbé Chazelaud, who no longer exercised any regular ministry, had such strange ideas. And common-sense—since he had refused to commit himself until he had seen Michel.

Come to that, suppose they arranged the meeting for tomorrow ? No need to let the priest know in advance : he was a man of very simple habits, and had gone out to spend a week at Saint Gilles, in the Camargue. He had heard that one of the local peasants, in widening a trench, had brought to light some Roman statues.

Michel jumped out of bed and plunged his head into cold water.

"We'll go to l'Aven d'Orgnac, it'll be more bracing."

"Sh !"

She was sure she had heard, in the silence of the night, the clatter of ancient mudguards shaken about by the potholes at the bottom of the hill. Maurier was approaching. For the moment there was no question of going on with the argument about l'Aven d'Orgnac.

Michel, who had not heard, had pinched her ear : "Little schoolmistress," he murmured. "It can't be easy for your pupils to get away with chattering in class."

She interrupted him; since Ludovic would be there within two minutes, it was urgent to let Michel know of the mood the old farmer was in. Twice that week he had been visited by his son. Stormy sessions. The Damezan employee wanted to buy a car, but hadn't the money, and was carrying on violently on the subject of his mother's inheritance.

"The old man's proud," she concluded. "He won't say a word to you about all this. But you can imagine it's made him even less friendly to Damezan."

All Michel said, after a silence, was, "Did you invite him?"

"Oh, no! He almost begged me to let him come. I could see the tears in his eyes."

What misty thoughts had led the good man to ask for this interview? In any old order, leukaemia and the habits of birds, the atomic bomb and the exquisite smell of new hay, Roman pottery and the treacherous appearance of the Damezan buildings, came and went and came again in his speech.

He had brought two bottles of a wine he said was light—but which, if that was possible, must have increased still further the need of sleep which Michel felt weighing upon his eyelids. (It was lucky he had not to make the conversation.)

Françoise gazed into the eyes of her two companions, each in turn.

"Would you believe it," the old man rambled on, "there are moments when I—and I'm pretty tough—can't bear the thought that I shall die one day? Understand what I mean? It's not that I admire old Ludovic, but I do admire the Ludovic who knows so much about animals and plants that there'll be no one to take his place when he's gone out feet foremost. There are young people" (he cleared his throat · one could tell he was thinking of his own son) "who treat us as old mugs, but——"

His right arm moved in a circle. An appeal to the village, to the whole earth. In the half light the points of his long moustaches might have been seen to quiver.

Was he not preparing a revelation?

He would like to know who, among all the dyed-in-the-wool country people, had the guts to try, day after day, without a break, to get himself accepted as a friend by the beaver colony along the Aiglette. He, Ludovic Maurier, had, ever since he was twelve, leaving out the dead years of the wars—and he still did. Result? When no one else in the country, not even the Woods and Forests wardens, had managed to catch sight of the tail of a beaver, so wild they are, it would be two years come tomorrow since he had come up close to these animals, as calmly as if they'd been people. They no longer jumped into the water when he came on the scene. No, sir. He had often met them face to face. Yes, sir. That was beautiful, that was marvellous, wasn't it?

Another great gesture. Deep in the night the fields, woods, mountains and beavers of the whole earth must be listening.

"When I steal through the bushes on the banks of the stream," he went on, "and in spite of the devilish din of the branches, reeds and rushes that I break or crush, I realize I'm not disturbing my friends, then I think my life hasn't been worthless. I don't care if you think I'm proud : I feel like one of your scientists who's hit on something good."

Michel raised his hand. He wanted to contribute something he remembered, but his tongue stuck to his mouth.

"Michel has just been through a terrible week's work," Françoise explained.

The old man was annoyed, and said that young people nowadays hadn't the stamina any more to stand up to hard work. Only people who had done the 1914/18 'campaign' had the right to talk of being tired.

He stood up, filled Michel's glass and carried it over to him carefully, like a medicine.

"In the shop this morning," he muttered, "simpletons were saying that there's a machine at Damezan that's started work again. Well? It's like the strike up there—no fights, no crowd of women waiting; the whole thing doesn't look serious."

When the farmer had left, Françoise thanked Michel for having been so patient. She wondered if poor Ludovic was not beginning to go off his head.

"Probably," answered the man of Damezan. "I found his beavers curiously interesting. But then the thread snapped."

He closed his eyes. He was trying to think of the pile which he had left behind that morning—completely cured, it was most likely, and the outside air humming with feverish delight at having the honour to be drawn into her and to ventilate her mysterious lungs.

Had the regulation quantity of plutonium been deposited on the peripheries of the uranium rods? The thickness of that fateful dust would be increasing—alas—sensibly less fast than before. But in any case, how valuable the invisible operation still was !

He screwed up his face. This evening a grace was lacking in him. Restless as a jibbing horse, his thoughts shied away, refused to slide into the metal's starry night.

There was nothing to do but, clumsily, humbly, go back to sleep. "Tomorrow, in the Camargue," he said gently.

He added no more about Ludovic. But a subtle plan was forming in his mind.

"Well, old man, not too sorry for yourself, for having spent a whole Sunday playing the nurse?"

Boussot's answering laugh was quite straightforward. Obviously one could imagine more tonic pastimes, 'but hell!—not everyone had the privilege of looking after a child weighing thousands of tons. Since yesterday the team had done excellent work. There was a whole pile of figures already waiting for Michel.

Why did I give way to fatigue? Michel was thinking. My place, till Monday, was with them. He muttered a scarcely audible "Bravo," which was like an avowal of defeat.

"Is Cahuzac at the Centre?" he went on to ask.

"Yes. With all his gang."

Therefore Launay himself . . . He felt still more gloomy.

"Goodbye, Jacques, old man. Don't drive yourself too hard," he said without conviction. "I'm going to ring up Cahuzac, I think we're on to something."

"O.K., old chap. See you tomorrow. I hope you've good news of your family."

Michel, not liking the allusion, hung up without replying. How could he have known that Juliette, on André's advice, had written to his friend? With a hesitant hand he felt the pocket into which he had slipped his wife's letter the evening before. He still had not opened it.

Oh well, what did that matter? He had said he would telephone to Cahuzac, and what he had to say was simple.

"Cahuzac, old man, I know where your detector is," he began, without beating about the bush.

And five minutes later, with his mind at rest because it had carried out its programme, he at last began to read the letter. He had no doubt it would be short: Juliette's was the large legible handwriting of superficial people.

He was impatient to rejoin Françoise.

'Mon cheri . . .'

She had no tact . . . The two pages had been written, it seemed, impulsively and had a quite unusual ring to them. He turned them over. Yes, the signature was Juliette's.

He re-read the first sentences several times. Either the human vocabulary was losing its value, or this was what is called a love-letter.

And a love-letter that did not wander off into nonsense. This was a sincere woman who knew what she wanted and was not afraid to say so. That she insisted on having her son and her husband back. Conjugal difficulties were useful, because they made it possible for one to examine one's conscience. In her disarray she had thought for a moment that she ought to make a new life with someone else; but the greatness of the work at Damezan . . .

Two underlined words shocked the reader like a discord. *I understand*. He growled out an oath. That fine verb, 'to understand', taken over by this pretentious woman! In point of fact that childish brain of hers understood so little that it had used underlining! How could it fail to see that this would put Michel off, once and for all?

He tore up the letter into a great many small pieces and scattered them on the ground.

Did he not immediately regret this violence? Was it the sight of Françoise's gloves on the marble table that made him want to cry? But how was it that she had not returned? She had said she was going to buy a book about the Abbey. He decided to go out and meet her.

She was coming down the small quiet street, reading as she came. Her blue wool beret was on the back of her head, leaving the smooth forehead free. Her walk was as peaceful and regular as the breathing of a sound sleeper. One could feel that all her movements helped her thinking. A woman who had the right to use the verb 'understand'.

He walked straight up to her and kissed her. She looked him in the eyes searchingly: "Something's happened at the pile?"

"No, darling, all's well."

She still went on looking at him.

The same low sky as yesterday weighed down the soft undulations of the plateau that died away when it reached the Rhône

canal, and the marshes and rice fields of the limitless plain of the Camargue with its mingling of grass and waters; and here that motionless and silent multiplication of dark clouds—great leather water-bottles well stoppered but quite full—seemed like a clumsy mirage.

The two lovers had reached a high open space where gipsy carts were grouped. A woman in yellow and red rags, crouching on her bare dirty heels, was cooking over a fire of packing cases, while a yard away a tall boy with jet-black hair was taking an old bicycle to pieces.

"Here's something that won't exist any longer when fission or fusion energy has triumphed," the man murmured.

"Are you sure?"

He had not expected a reply, and could think of nothing to say. Again he gazed at the vast, monotonous ashen or rust-coloured landscape which stretched till it lost itself between the soot of the horizon and the disorder of the sky, in the direction of an invisible sea. He stood still with his arm round Françoise's waist. How sweet it was to feel the breath of a trusting life rising and falling, like waves, between his finger and thumb. But this young woman, whose body was not trembling, was also a woman who gave up none of her ideas; and Michel could well believe that, threaded in filigree through the clean planes of that panorama varied with reeds and clouds, she could see the poisoned proving-grounds of the Pacific Ocean.

What would be left of the mysterious wild life sanctuaries of the Vaccarès—that Eldorado of the great free birds—if fission products contaminated the waters of the Rhône, its source?

Pollution by oil had stopped fishing in the étang de Berre, but this was an incomparably more terrible menace.

A menace that was luckily an old wives' tale! Did he, Michel Renoir, want to poison a single bird, a single fish? How could Françoise be so mistaken about the man she loved and the men at Damezan? A day would come, all the same, when he would manage to convince her . . . Slowly he withdrew his arm. It was time, he said, to visit the church.

"What do you think of my priest?"

"Nice. And a wily bird. He told us a lot of nonsense, first so

as not to give away his finds, and secondly to avoid lunching with us."

Françoise laughed softly. She was delighted at having at last got out of him this judgment, which she entirely approved. She would see the Abbé Chazelaud again. In spite of his ready tongue and his worldly wisdom, he had been embarrassed in Michel's presence, and, for the first time since she had known him, had talked about archaeology without any warmth. She would organize another meeting.

The car was moving fast. In the twilight, as it took over the countryside again, the large, vague, familiar forms of the heights they had left that morning rose ahead. Lights were coming out in the isolated farms. A great silent night was about to be born.

"Before we get home," said Françoise, "here's a bit of good news. Your son's beginning to adopt me."

"Oh, very good!" cried Michel, hastily reducing speed. "But in that case, up to now——"

"Up to now it wasn't bad, don't let's exaggerate."

"Has there been some fact which justifies talking of a change?"

"He came looking for me and told me he liked it in my house. When one knows how shy the soul of a child is, it's reliable evidence."

Michel accelerated. She will be my wife, he kept saying to himself. And he promised himself that, when they were in the small room which was their refuge, he would question her about his son's intelligence. As a teacher she was objectivity itself: she would tell him the good things and the less good.

"Home," he thought aloud as, on their right, the dark mass of the lonely house stood out against the starry sky.

But Françoise made no comment. There was no light shining from the first floor. And yet little Michel should have been there, with Mariette looking after him—the old woman who had undertaken to bring him back at about four o'clock.

An immediate presentiment came to her. The child must have been play-acting. And here was his father who did not even think of worrying.

They got out of the car. She went in first, and ran through the house, calling.

"Let's go to the Lagardes," she ordered, as soon as she had made sure of the boy's absence.

"Michel will be here in five minutes. Have a cup of tea. I'll go and see if there's any news on the wireless—don't forget, the strike can't end as long as no government——"

It was with a real cry that she interrupted him.

"Let's go to the Lagardes!"

He stood up. He told himself that the best of women still had hysterical reactions. When she had calmed down he would convince her of this scientifically.

An hour later little Fabienne, between her sobs, was confessing that her friend Michel had fled, and that she had helped him. After giving him her savings she had guided him to the main road, where a car had stopped to take him aboard. She had heard someone say 'Marseille'.

IO

MICHEL'S CAR DROVE OFF. AT ONCE THE HURTFUL DIALOGUE started up between the lovers, while their gaze tried to outrun the headlights and pierce the huge night.

It was Michel's duty to inform his wife, Françoise had said firmly. And he replied that that would be stupid: in less than two hours the police would catch the young scamp.

"I tell you it's your duty."

"I tell you again that you're no judge of that. I'm not at the kindergarten now."

She bit her lip till the blood came. Then as soon as she had the strength she returned to the attack.

"We've all been wrong. You oughtn't to have taken that child away from his mother, she oughtn't to have let you take him, and I oughtn't to have agreed to bring him up. Now that we're all in it, there's a bond between us, whether you like it or no. To ring up your wife is the least you can do. The child is hers."

"There speaks the female of the species! Always, always that appeal to pity! In a world that's only held together by force."

"Shut up, Michel, you should be ashamed!"

She had felt her shoulders sagging. She was almost broken. But she was unwilling to leave him the last word, she was unwilling to give way to tears.

She was right, he was thinking; but if he preferred to be wrong, wasn't he free? The essential thing in moments of crisis is to hold on rather than to think. All these human beings who depended on him—why were they so desperately anxious to be in direct relation with each other? As though he were not there, firmly placed in the centre—the man directing them. Françoise holding out a helping hand to Juliette—yet another form of escape. A grotesque picture.

"Wait for me."

The car had stopped at the beginning of the village, in front of a large house. There were three motor-scooters propped against a wall, and behind a window without curtains children of the same size as the child who had disappeared could be seen playing an energetic game of ping-pong. Michel, when he had reached the corridor, went back and opened the car door.

"Come. You can be useful as a guide."

So it was not even remorse that had brought him back.

But she had jumped out. To the devil with one's personal pride. The only thing that counted was the poor child.

It was a sad satisfaction to meet with more humanity in strangers: the sturdy family men of whom the local police consisted surely knew nothing of the problems of nuclear energy, but they at once vibrated in sympathy.

If they clutched hold of the word 'kidnap' rather eagerly, it was because they had not forgotten the lamentable Villeneuve-lès-Avignon case, quite close by. A brief statement from their visitors and already they were determined to set all the wheels in motion. The *Services Généraux* of the Préfecture, the *Sûreté Nationale* . . .

The sergeant was just taking up the telephone receiver.

"One moment," Michel interrupted, "it's essential that neither the press nor the radio should get wind of this. After all, it's only an ordinary case of a child running away."

The other had slowly put down the receiver. His large dark goggle eyes stared at this extraordinary man who thought him too zealous, and at the secret face of the woman with him. He scented

complications. Essential pieces of information were being kept from him out of pride.

He said calmly that he would refer to his chiefs: it was for them to decide if M. Renoir's scruples should be respected. In these days, when a quick result was wanted, a radio-appeal was a first-class weapon.

Françoise was thinking of Mme Renoir, who would have turned on her wireless this Sunday evening. At all costs she must be prevented from learning by this soulless means of the blow that was descending on her. Why did not Michel grab the telephone?

All Michel did was rapidly to throw various pieces of paper down on the desk.

"The name of Damezan is tabu: it's an order," he stated in what was almost a tone of hatred. "If you don't exercise discretion it will cost you dear. You can be sure of that."

Françoise looked at Michel accusingly, but the sergeant had not batted an eyelid. He simply said, "Very well."

He asked calmly, as the atomic scientist rose, whether there was not a telephone number which the child might know and, in his bewilderment, try to ring up. Some friend, some relative he would long to see again.

The man of Damezan closed the conversation with a categorical "No."

"And now back home," muttered Michel, starting the car.

With a throbbing heart Françoise waited for him to say more. Was it possible that that admirable mind should remain so cold?

"I'll get up early tomorrow," he went on with decision, "and find out if there's any news."

In other words he was giving orders about the time table just as, a moment ago, he had given orders to the village police sergeant. From his easy, sweeping way of driving one could tell that he had already regained all his assurance.

She closed her eyes.

"You must," she said forcefully, "telephone to your wife. Why did you lie? It's so obvious that your son wants to get back to his mother."

Although Michel loved obstinate people and was now receiving precisely the advice he was secretly giving himself, he laughed

evilly. They were too silly, both of them. A little fool who couldn't appreciate how amazingly lucky he was—the best thing was to let him fend for himself. Let him go hungry for a bit. That would harden him for later on. He would have gone on—he had got going nicely, and what did it matter if he hardly believed in what he was saying?—but he was harshly interrupted.

“Michel ! Listen to me !”

He felt a shiver go through him.

“Come, come,” he said quickly, “you must have realized that I shall telephone. To please you.”

“No. You will telephone. But because it's your duty !”

The man swallowed his humiliation. His heart was beating very fast. He guessed too well what threats had lain hidden beneath Françoise's cry.

At the door of the lonely house she gave him a long kiss :

“Till tomorrow evening,” she whispered. “Send me a telegram when they have found him.”

“But surely I shall be back here almost at once?”

She held both his hands and looked at him in the darkness. This leader of men and creator of great plans was still thinking like a selfish child. Heavy human crises passed him by like clouds and left him obstinately unmoved.

She kissed him again. She was sorry for him, even in his aberrations.

“Be sensible, Michel : as long as you haven't the telephone here it's impossible for you to come back.”

He groaned a surprising “That's true.” And already he had turned on his heel and was moving away without a word of good-bye. How much simpler the situation would have been, he thought if Françoise had been able to sleep at Nouvillargues. When he had divorced and remarried there would no longer be this ridiculous coming and going.

He stopped, however, and began to talk. She could not see him now, but this only made his nocturnal confession more clearly audible to her.

“To you it seems that I don't think enough of my son. Perhaps you're right, but you must understand me. My son is so much myself. If I were in his place, I would find a way of gaining

something from this flight—and why shouldn't he, I ask you, in this case? You can't expect me to dissolve in self-pity . . .”

The young woman thought it better not to reply. With anguish she heard the sound of the car diminish, till it was drowned between heaven and earth in that starry silence that gave one such a poignant longing for the mistral. The little Michel, who had been entrusted to her and whose love she had not managed to gain—where might he be at that moment? Suppose that, overcome by cold and fear, he was just about to slip out of the surrounding darkness and hurl himself into her arms, there and then?

She told herself she was mad. Of course the stubborn little creature would die rather than return to her.

If he did return, she promised herself, she would resume his upbringing on better principles. Michel had misled her when he had urged her to constant firmness. She did not blame the child for having abused her confidence, for she too, in her way, had played a trick.

How could he have come back? His mother's tenderness was drawing him through the night, driving him onwards with the same secret force as a pebble in space.

She ought to be praying. In what words?

To think that, in the child she no longer dared hope for for herself, she had wanted to be able to see his father's likeness.

“Protect them both,” she murmured, without knowing to whom she was praying, nor for whom. For she was sorry for Juliette also.

A dog barked far away in the countryside. She waited for an instant, and then, filled with sadness, opened her door.

It had taken only two weeks, he thought, for his room at Nouvilargues to acquire this foreign look. Even the familiar toothbrush sticking out of a cream-coloured tumbler seemed changed into a display object.

How could one ever believe that Michel junior, with that good simple head of his, had slept in this official landscape?

Propped against the telephone on the bedside table there was a folded paper. Michel opened it. It was from the manager, to say that there had been a call from the Centre for M. Renoir at about 2 p.m. Would he please ring back?

At about 2 p.m.? It couldn't be about the boy's flight already.

Damn it all, that wasn't the one and only event on the face of the earth! Already he had asked for the Damezan number. The call to Juliette was less urgent.

Damezan came through—the preliminary ringing tone, then the telephone girl's clear voice. He asked for Boussot. He was back in his own world, like an athlete in his stadium. He felt as if the microphone put him in direct touch with the pile, with the secret darkenesses of the alchemy of its rods, and with those laws of the infinitely small, laws as subtle as the work of primitive legislators on which the fates of peoples depend.

"How are you?" asked the engineer of A.

Spontaneously Michel replied, "Very well."

He had some difficulty in pulling himself up. No, that was going too far, when his son had disappeared! At the same time, for Jacques' first words to be so normal, the pile must be giving satisfaction; and wasn't that still, in spite of everything, the essential?

He stammered that he had just had a personal upset. "Don't let's talk about that. Was it you who telephoned me at about two?"

Boussot replied that it was. A letter with the words '*Urgent*' and '*Most Secret*' had arrived at the Centre, addressed to Michel.

"And the pile?" said Michel, checking up.

"As good as gold."

Excellent. The reserve of plutonium possessed by France had increased. Working at a power of 36, the yield was less than before, but it would be wrong to turn up one's nose at it.

Silence had fallen again. Michel had not forgotten Juliette: he had promised to telephone to her. But could the mysterious letter be kept waiting? *URGENT*. Why didn't he ask Boussot to open it and give him the gist of it? He trusted this friend absolutely. No, the secrets of nuclear energy are not open secrets.

"I'll take my car and be with you," he said suddenly, with excitement.

Boussot shouted to him not to budge—he would have the letter sent over to Nouvillargues. Michel refused with energy.

He felt, none the less, a wave of remorse as he passed through the guarded gate. He went into the small building, asked if he might telephone and rang up the police at Cressac. He recognized the sergeant's voice.

"No, Monsieur Renoir. Nothing yet. It's too soon. In any case rely on me : as soon as we know anything we'll let you know at Damezan."

The night that mingles with the stars the glow of the lights on A's chimney belongs to that grand species of nights—those that resemble nuclear purity. Feeble spirits would call it oppressive, but it is not for childish senses to fix the scale of values. The truth was, it was a magnificent night. Worthy to weigh upon the sacred plateau where the darknesses of the pile celebrated their ritual.

The noise of the fan marked the making of the national plutonium.

Boussot had slept little and smoked a great deal : his face had a slightly corpse-like look. To say so would be to praise him. For the brave pile, yesterday restored to the liberty of its flow, one could not choose a better symbol than a human face.

The engineer handed his friend a large white envelope with five seals on the back, and then discreetly went out into the next room.

Michel noticed a paper-knife on the desk. It seemed to him more virile to open the letter by hand. Two large pages of type-script without a heading. '*Mon cher Michel . . .*' he looked at once at the signature : 'Aubier'. He felt a shock. Why this solemn formality? It must be, at least, to break to him a disappointment? To remove him from his job? To take the future reactors away from him?

Taking a cigarette, he read the message twice running, slowly and collectedly. Time for consideration—it was the least one could say—would seem necessary. But already he understood that he would not insist on that : Aubier had too clear a view of things as a whole. His allusion to piles *F*, *G* and *H* left room, this time, for no ambiguity. An allusion in writing! Michel would certainly make the journey to which, after referring the matter very high up, his direct chief was 'inviting' him—a military command in its gaseous state.

Sitting down at his friend's desk, he took up the receiver and asked for Juliette's number. It was seven p.m. If his memory was not playing a trick, he could motor to Marignane and be at Ciampino by about five next morning. He frowned : Marignane is

the airport of a town whose name, in present circumstances, he would have preferred not to be reminded of.

Auteuil 02-33 was ringing. A child's voice, slow and grave.

"Is that you, Pierrette? Could you call your mother?"

No reply.

"Can you hear me?"

"Is that you, Daddy?" said the girl, hesitantly. She made up her mind at last: "I'll go and see if Mummy will come."

Had Juliette dared to criticize him in front of his daughters? Or had Michel junior managed to get in touch with his mother? Fine: in that case he was a child who knew how to shift for himself.

"Hallo!" cried the loud, familiar voice, at once talking about letters. He cut firmly into this torrent of high-pitched words. "Michel has run away."

The tone changed at once—a wild clamour. "What's that you say? You dare? It's appalling! How is it possible that, in a school . . ."

She had not the strength to continue. She broke down and sobbed. Michel could imagine the convulsed face. That noise of sniffing and sobbing and moaning without any thought of dignity spoke of a woman wounded to the quick, no longer of the Parisian butterfly—who perhaps had never existed except as a defence mechanism.

"I'll explain to you another time," he muttered apologetically.

She began to wail. "There's nothing to explain, except that he must be found."

He clenched his teeth. Why should not he too yell? Exasperation is so convenient for covering up shame.

"He will be found. Little good-for-nothings never get lost. A miserable child, all those airs and graces——"

Juliette's furious voice drowned his. Let him mend his language and have some respect for her son. She ought never to have let poor little Michel go away, when he was much too young for a boarding-school. She did not know what she would do if anything happened to him.

"I hate you!" she shouted and banged down the receiver.

Michel sat dully with the telephone to his ear, then at length put it down and stood up. A weariness, in addition to the

exhaustion produced by his work, to that whole week of pile, plutonium and night-watches, flooded him to his inmost depths. He pressed his nose to the window. For quite a while he stared at the night outside, without seeing it.

Was it his fault, he thought, if only a few men understood the immensity of men's tasks?

Boussot, no longer hearing any sound, came into the room on tiptoe. He opened one or two drawers and pretended to be putting away files.

"Have you ten minutes?" Michel asked, suddenly looking him in the eyes.

The engineer merely nodded. He had always time for other people.

In the cold, objective voice he would use to describe a strange machine or to comment on a graph, Michel at once began a brief account of his own private crisis. He emphasized that he was not asking for advice, but communicating information to a colleague for the good of the Service : he was going to be away for thirty to thirty-six hours, and it was essential that, during this interval, the stupid business of his private life should not disturb the work of the Centre.

He no longer attempted concealment. Abandoning the fiction of Michel junior's boarding-school, he revealed the existence of Françoise.

"I'll introduce you to her one of these days," he said without any apparent embarrassment.

Boussot turned away. The calm voice had already continued : "She's exactly the woman I needed. We nuclear scientists, the creators of vast energy, need people whose love is inexhaustible . . ."

He had finished telling his story, and all his instructions had been given ; and yet Michel found it hard to get up from the chair. In the atmosphere of the room he perceived the disapproval of which he was the object, and unexpectedly he found it painful. He wished Boussot would speak. There would be so much to say about the flight of Michel junior. He looked searchingly into his friend's face.

"I suppose," said the latter, "your journey is indispensable."

"I think so," Michel answered. "The chance of these meetings has to be seized while it's there. I can't tell you more."

A silence.

"You, who are a Catholic," he said suddenly in a tone of provocation, "don't you think my son's behaving like the Prodigal Son?"

Boussot examined the varnish of his desk with an exaggerated interest. "You know better than I do what a bad comparison that is."

Michel closed his eyes for several seconds, to hide his disarray. He pulled himself together and began, aggressively, to poke fun at women's deplorable tendency to tremble for their progeny.

Boussot, not feeling he had the right to criticize, stood up to show that the conversation displeased him.

Michel stood up in turn.

Although, in the night outside, the sound of the reactor's fan rose as it should, a clear continuous whistling that bore witness to the dark night of the chemical elements, the air seemed to perceive something missing, Sunday though it was: an enormous awning of silence over the sites of *B* and *C*. These huge series of moments flowing by, all these days, without a single minute devoted to the work! And during this time what was Japan doing? Or Germany? Or Canada?

The strange journey which Michel Renoir was to make would perhaps shake up this lethargy. Where he was going there would be no question, in direct terms, of those deserted sites, but neither had they ever represented the whole future of Damezan. Beyond them and their silence there were still the marvellous possibilities of the unknown. A word from Mullerer, an intuition of Michel's, a meeting with Laroche and his team—and who would dare to contradict the future?

The scientist had reached his office. His mind was fully lucid. In a few moments he had written on a sheet of paper for Mme Vauvert her instructions for the next few days' work. Then a telephone call to the police: would they please note that they should ring Boussot when the child has been found?

A second call. Launay, true to his grand manner, merely acknowledged the news.

"You are going to Rome? Fine, my dear Renoir. I wish you an interesting journey."

He added that, when the telephone had rung, he had been listening to the wireless. "Bad news again," he declared in a clear voice: "Mercadier refuses to form a government. We're back where we were. I hope, all the same, we shall not be dead on the day when France has a government again."

His despair's an act, thought Michel, who liked this irony which spoke of strength, and made no comment.

But this small phrase from the Director caught his ear: "I hope you will see clearer in your problems when you come back from Italy."

What was strange about that? Obviously he meant scientific problems! The sly fascinating problems involved in preventing accidents to reactors. And yet had he perceived, or only imagined, a trace of malice in the august inflexions? I've had a lucky escape, he told himself with uneasy relief as soon as he had put down the telephone: that police sergeant who talked of putting out a radio-appeal when—precisely—the Director was listening to the wireless.

Had he not, all the same, failed in his duty? When he had confided the story to Boussot, had he not said he was informing a colleague, not a friend? But before confiding it to Boussot, should he not have done so to Launay?

One sentence disposed of all that: Michel's direct chief was Aubier, no one else.

Therefore when he rang up Aubier, he ought to tell his story all over again.

But when it came to the point, Michel realized that he could not. Here was Aubier, quite close to him, voice to voice, explaining from his Paris office in friendly tones and a minimum of words certain points which his message had left obscure. No one at this stage, he said, could forecast the results of the mission to Rome: but what could, quite legitimately, be stressed was that upon Michel many hopes depended.

To cut in upon these sovereign statements for the sake of something so banal was out of the question.

"Allow me to wish you good luck," said Aubier with a gruffness that failed to conceal his emotion.

"Thanks, old man."

There was nothing to do but to hang up. And to let things at this end run their course for thirty-six hours, while trying to do useful work at the other end.

There is only one nuclear energy, and only one form of courage . . .

Michel's movements as he packed a small suitcase reminded him of a journey with Juliette . . . poor woman. She had had a terrible blow when she had heard of her son's flight. Those sobs, those cries, that savage hatred. Since she was destined to become remote from him, perhaps she was worth far more than he liked to think.

II

"YOUR HEALTH!" SAID MULLERER FOR THE FIFTEENTH TIME.

Michel did not answer. Dipping his lips into his glass, he did no more than moisten them.

The large blue and gold restaurant in the centre of which, like an index of its capabilities, there stretched a long table overloaded with fish, fruit and flowers, seemed almost empty.

'Quite exceptional,' said the contented faces of waiters and musicians: it was just before Christmas and the customers would be back again for the Christmas Eve dinner.

"Have you a favourite piece of music?" asked Mullerer in his most amiable tone.

Michel disdained restaurant bands. And besides, this evening, he might gladly have exchanged the finest melodies in the world for one secret of his host's.

"*Eine Kleine Nachmusik*," he whispered.

"Gut!"

Mullerer scribbled on a piece of pastboard and called for the head waiter. Below his smooth Yul Brynner skull his tormented face, whose large dark eyes had an unhealthy fixity, screwed itself up. "So you remember?" he said sharply, and filled the glasses.

It had been in 1945, in a low Wurtemberg dance-hall, at the wan hour when the customers are on the point of being turned

out. Sitting in a corner, close against Michel, on whom he had just inflicted a lachrymose but sincere confession of his past life, he had revealed an agony in his conscience : how was he to know whether he had not contributed at least a hundredth part to the making of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs?

"Why a hundredth?" asked the Frenchman, true to his national scepticism.

Should the sceptic be told that the plans of a certain mechanism had been stolen from Mullerer?

He should be told nothing. One would act stupid. But Michel was not taken in.

"If you had means of proving that you had helped in the making of the bomb," he said, "you wouldn't neglect to do so."

Mullerer had seized a pile of menus. To convince this stubborn man, he was on the point of writing down a series of formulae. But then he threw his pen on the ground. Another man's opinion no longer interested him. He had got up, sat down at the piano and begun to play *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*.

No doubt. But these memories went back to before the Flood, to a time when France could imagine she was a victorious nation, and when Germany had to consider herself a beaten one.

At that time the atomic bombs had given everyone such a bad conscience that it seemed no country would ever dare to use them.

Who would now indulge in such an idea?

"You've heard speak in detail of Operation Ricochet?" Mullerer asked, and a veil of misery descended over his poor face.

Proud of showing off before two music-loving foreigners, and with their hearts full also of the cheerfulness of the streets which proclaimed the coming of Christmas, the musicians had attacked Mozart's simple suite *allegro feroce*. Holding out against their histrionic fury, the tenderness of the melody still came through, like a man's kindness on a churlish face.

I was wrong to ask for this piece, thought Michel in exasperation. Why wasn't he in this luxurious setting with Françoise, and not with this melancholy scientist, slow to come clean and charged with suspect purposes?

As in a dream, he heard his own voice. He was saying that he had read two or three French or American articles on the famous

Operation. The fact that he was no longer sure where he had read it showed that nothing had really been revealed.

"Rotten journalists," said Mullerer succinctly. "Ricochet is terrifying! *Dämonisch! Dämonisch!*"

Michel bent his head and frowned. It was his sole concession to pity. For his conscience was clear: his own sector was concerned with the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

"Well?" growled the other. "Aren't you nuclear scientists in France going to make up your minds to a solemn protest?"

The Frenchman—for Frenchman he was—refused to believe that the other man had put his cards on the table. Before the meal, on the pretext that Italian olive-oil was the best in the world, Mullerer had drunk a soup-spoonful. The old trick of the man who knows he is talkative when he has drunk rather too much. And indeed Michel had hastened to do the same. They would see which of them was the better master of his tongue.

"A question in answer to yours," he said roughly. "What is your present nationality?"

"*Gut!* I've an American passport, but simply . . . for the pocket. Scientists have no country."

His eyes concentrated on Michel. It was impossible to guess the meaning of the gleams that came and went in them.

"You agree with that?"

"My God, no!"

Mullerer impassively proposed a toast. One waiter took away their plates, another brought fresh ones and a third presented the meat course.

"There's a contradiction that worries me," Michel went on, ill at ease under the stare which imprisoned his face. "On the one hand people don't want my country to make bombs; and on the other they insist that it should join the chorus against nuclear armaments. On the one hand a country under tutelage; on the other, a free country. Isn't that rather stupid?"

"It is stupid. *Natürlich*——"

Mullerer gave a slight grin.

"It's stupid the way you put it. Those who refuse the bombs are governments, those who advocate . . . making a stink are scientists. Not the same thing."

He's as persistent as an André Thomas-Laborde, Michel

thought, seeing again Juliette's face and hearing again her explosion of cries. The band, more frantic than ever, attacked the third movement of its speed exercise.

"*Cher ami*," (it was the first time the Damezan man had used this form of address—it had slipped out), "I'm sorry to contradict you. I think the scientists and the politicians are in collusion."

It was a clever remark and a false step: Mullerer's eyes lit up with malice.

"*Gut!* So it's because French scientists and technicians are worth nothing that you have now no government? That your country's going to pot? I'm interpreting your own words."

Michel had turned pale, but did not remain long at a loss:

"Have you ever heard of American passports being used without an enquiry?" he retorted. "I haven't. The U.S. police are well informed. They have the right to be."

Had he not perhaps laid it on too thick? Mullerer had put his hand to his heart and his head was swaying as if he were giddy. His yellowish face, scored with deep wrinkles and scars, looked like a tract of country under a curse.

"Forgive me," murmured the Frenchman.

The other slowly pulled a box of pills out of his pocket. He was a long way from the jaunty individual who had taken the discreet man's ritual spoonful of oil.

"It's I who should be forgiven," he said almost inaudibly.

A head waiter had come over to the diners. As if speaking of a piece of lost property, he whispered. "Monsieur Renoir."

Michel was amazed and gave a start. The Italian noticed and came and bent over him. "You're wanted on the telephone, Monsieur Renoir. I'll show you where it is."

How did anyone guess I was here? Michel kept asking himself.

A grave and honeyed voice—the porter's desk at the *Savoia*: "A telegram has come for Monsieur Renoir. It's been brought already opened."

"Would you be kind enough to read it to me?"

"*Volontieri*. Michel found. All well. Best wishes. Jacques.'" A message from Boussoit.

The scientist hung up. His legs gave under him, as if made of lint. He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the wall

of the telephone-booth. His heart was beating wildly. Deep down in him he had just understood for the first time that his son, a child he had wanted and had tried to shape with a fierce enthusiasm, had been in danger of death. To think that, a moment ago, the poor kid's father had been posturing at a table, giving himself up wholly to the charm of a difficult conversation. And yet it was human blood, the blood of a human being who could tremble, that was flowing in his veins.

If there is a God, thanks be to Him.

He tore some leaves out of his pocket diary and wrote out three telegrams. The restaurant *chasseur*, who was to post them, did not know French; but he was born at Naples, he would manage.

"Give me a glass of wine," Michel asked at the telephone switchboard. He sat down. He was all in—but Boussot's words sang in his memory. Michel is found and all is well. His friend had written that all was well: that meant that Michel was found and also that the pile was working normally and that the marvellous plutonium was still being produced from the night of its rods.

Was there a connection between the two facts which he picked up with one and the same glance—a leather briefcase that had changed place, and a new expression on Mullerer's face?

It was best to pretend not to notice. If *someone* had tried to have a look at his papers, *someone* would have drawn blank. He, Michel, didn't carry confidential documents about like that. Besides, in certain circles which the German-American scientist had known and to which perhaps he still belonged, one was schooled to believe that nothing is left lying about by chance—that there are silent ways of provoking indiscreet curiosity.

He sat down without a word. Mullerer signed to a waiter to warm up the dish again.

"Good news?" he asked his guest in a friendly tone.

"Excellent."

Mustn't it have been he, Michel asked himself, who let the *Savoia* know where we would be going? In that case, he put on an excellent act of indecision just now.

"I'm glad to hear that." Mullerer's voice sounded mischievous. "When a man like Michel Renoir says that the news is excellent, one must take that to mean that his Damezan is at work and its

plutonium production is good. Isn't that true? I am very very interested in what you people are doing."

Michel nodded assent. He felt it would be out of place to mention his son's flight; but in the space in front of his glasses he seemed to read again the words on a telegram which someone was holding out to him, and a happy warmth went through him. That dear little swashbuckler, Michel junior, was no longer on the road. He had found again the calm and orderliness of a house.

Which house? At the moment when it occurred to him that not all the problems were solved, words struck his ear: "Have you any children?"

Good God, was this a sorcerer sitting opposite him?

"Yes, three. Why do you ask?"

"Just friendship. How much do you earn?"

A regular questionnaire, thought Michel. It's true the Americans make no mystery of what they are paid . . . All the same, one really can't enter into this game.

"Suppose," he said smiling, "that it's a State secret."

"In that case, I know the figure. You'd get three or four times as much with us."

"I thought as much, you know."

"The pay," said Mullerer, "is only part of the problem: there's also the important matter of the finance set aside for research . . . In this field a certain country is unbeatable. Scientists can't stand an atmosphere in which one is held back from making things, or even from imagining, by miserable budget questions!"

Michel pushed away from him a plate that was still almost full and lit a Gitane.

"Pasteur, Branly and many others didn't have dollars to play with. Nor did Joliot-Curie. That didn't prevent them from becoming famous and doing service to research all over the world," he said forcefully.

And yet he looked down at the tablecloth: he had just defended an opinion which, in the industrial field, was the opposite of his own; and it was also—indeed mainly—as an industrial that a Damezan man must think of science.

Mullerer was not taken in. With a flick he demolished the argument.

"Nuclear reactors are not built on the cheap, with old bricks and old bits of corrugated iron."

To prevent his pleasant young colleague from plunging in deeper still, he waved his hand above the table and closed the passage-at-arms with :

"Think it over. Telephone me your answer tomorrow."

Michel got rid of his anger by nervous puffs of smoke. A man like Mullerer had received too many blows from life for one to venture, there and then, to teach him a lesson. Besides, the conversation was still going on.

"Do you think that indispensable?" he asked with a smile. "I come of a race of diehard patriots. My country's in my blood."

"Believe me, mine, in 1945 . . . Look, Renoir, I think I'm a good American, a good European and a German, all at the same time. Perhaps that's what I mean when I say scientists have no country."

Led by the fat head waiter, a well-dressed couple walked through the far end of the room. Michel disregarded the husband, a tall, bald, sallow man of half-breed type in a tight-fitting light-coloured suit, to concentrate on the wife, a slim, sinuous Italian woman whose lavender-blue coat and skirt—a marvellously gay splash of colour under the caress of the yellow light—accentuated her unaffected walk. She looks like Françoise, he thought. He shut his eyes to bring before his mind the day, now so near, when he would see his friend again.

Mullerer had asked for the cheese-board to be placed on their table. He apologized to Michel for most of the cheeses being Italian, Dutch or Swiss : he would have liked to make him feel at home there by reminding him of French versatility, of which the many kinds of cheeses are not a bad symbol.

"After all, it's only one case among many," he insisted.

The Frenchman did not respond. While his hands were in that Rome restaurant, cutting for politeness' sake a piece of Camembert, his mind was hovering like a sparrow-hawk in great circles above Damezan and its machine-monuments.

"Your health !"

He tasted his glass of Burgundy absent-mindedly. In Mullerer's eyes, haughty like A's chimney, he saw a vast sky framing the new

building of a reactor of a still unknown type, the finest of all, standing steadfast against the moving clouds.

"An excellent wine of your country," said Mullerer. "I think, all the same, you Frenchmen get lost in unnecessary complications. Do you follow me, *mon cher* Renoir?"

"Better than I seem to," he replied, his attention roused. He was sure he could guess exactly where his host's next words would lead. Even if Mullerer's game was still obscure at many points, the purpose of his subtle and patient skill was already showing. Obviously they would discuss moderators for neutrons—that was the official reason for their meeting, and there could be no more normal scientific reason. On that subject there was so much to be said—or so much to be concealed. But they would not get there at once. Mullerer wanted the ground cleared first, and all the punches that the contestants had prepared in advance delivered.

Mullerer had turned the board so that he might more easily cut a piece of Brie. But when he had rendered this homage to the French nation he began the indictment, slowly and harshly. The French nuclear energy policy was all wrong! Practically a folly! For the 'plutonium way' was leading nowhere, for the moment, except to bombs, which were so much dead capital, and there was no reason to think things would ever change. Yes, yes, independence as regards energy sources . . . Euratom . . . Old wives' tales! The frog puffing himself up in hopes of being the size of the ox! France, incapable of solving her African problems, incapable of housing her inhabitants properly and incapable of reforming her procedures, was spending fantastic sums in order to play at being the fourth atomic power, in the expectation of an hour which would never strike.

"Come, Renoir, between the two of us, both of us serious scientists, freed—yes, yes, you too—from national illusions, don't you think the joke has gone on long enough?"

It was the first time Michel had heard a foreign specialist use such language to him, but he had long been familiar with the argument and he knew what retort to make. With a surge of joy he thought of the men who had charged him with this mission. They would not have chosen the wrong man—happy as he was to defend, in the same breath, his country and science.

Now was the moment when every word would count—everything Michel would say, everything he would hear. If he were to insist on the intellectual dishonesty of a political argument, according to which France had neither the right to neutralism nor the right to possess nuclear armaments, or again was expected to defend her independence indefatigably against a certain country simply in order to come under the domination of another—the discussion would never end : politically, no country is pure ; and in France there was a disorder, a spirit of dishonesty and a lack of civic spirit which the German-American scientist might well accuse his companion of passing over for the sake of winning points.

The attack must be made on the scientific plane : he must show that the 'plutonium way' did not deserve such discredit. The models of *A* and of the reactors now building would become his weapons. The whole of Damezan must rush to his aid. We shall argue, he thought, like farmers of the invisible world, with hard figures of implements and harvests, graphite, heavy water, fuel element replacement, and the various shapes of rods. Even if, before the century is up, scientists get the industrial exploitation of thermo-nuclear energy going on a favourable economic basis, the men who have struggled with the problems set by fission energy will have deserved well of their country and of the human community.

Michel had promised to ring up Mullerer at about ten next morning. He had arranged to leave that afternoon. If the aeroplane was on time, he would be back with Françoise the same evening, before midnight.

To a non-believer Christmas meant nothing ; but the man, having never ceased to respect that date deep down inside him, concealed his weakness by attributing it to the woman he loved. After what she had lately gone through, a young woman might well be allowed a caprice . . .

But it was Mullerer who rang up, at nine in the morning. Last night's discussion, he said, had only begun the debate : serious scientists would belie their name if they left them where they were. It was urgent to continue. This evening, when they had arrived at ideas that were clear, they would call in two or three Italians, first-class specialists in moderators, to work with them.

The man of Damezan, who had gone to bed at three that morning and was still in bed, wanted simply to refuse, but in that same instant he knew he would consent. Whatever Mullerer might say, he did not feel obliged to do so : he merely felt that to run away would be to grow old ; nuclear energy admitted to its intimacy only those whose minds had kept their youth.

He had not forgotten Juliette's suffering at the moment when she heard of her son's flight. He too could make a sacrifice in his turn, by renouncing the joy of Christmas Eve spent with his future wife.

He would send Françoise a message warning her that there would be a telephone call for her at four in the afternoon, in the telephone-booth at *La Gaîté Champêtre*. He would ring up Bousso without delay. And, if there were still a few minutes left, Auteuil 02-33. It would be shameful to leave things where they were with his ex-wife—their last words had been of hatred.

From the heights of Damezan—to which, ever since he had arrived in Italy, Michel had felt bound by every fibre of his being—came the voice of the engineer of the pile. It was almost unrecognizable and rather difficult to catch—but wasn't it better so? One was free to interpret it as the monotonous murmur of the master of the chemical elements, reporting the obedience of their mass. Everything and everyone was all right. It had been possible to relax the emergency measures. The engineers could now go home to sleep.

Michel thought of how the French plutonium reserve was now continually increasing in the uranium darkness, like a man's strength in the secret recesses of his being. An idea came to him :

"Jacques, old man," he asked, "would it be a bore for you to telegraph 20,000 francs to my wife for the children's Christmas? With this silly exchange business, I can't from here."

"Nothing could be easier."

At Auteuil 02-33 Michel got only the voice of Louise. Madame had gone away. "No, sir, Madame hasn't said where."

To collect her son, he thought. But he said nothing.

That afternoon, since no call came from Vignolles 12, he decided to make the call himself. He got through almost at once

and recognized the old woman's voice without difficulty. But she told him that nobody had come.

"I'm telephoning from abroad," he insisted. "Wouldn't it be possible for a motor-cyclist to let Mademoiselle Romieu know? I'll give you my number."

"But, monsieur, it's not at all convenient! Christmas Eve . . ."

"Ask one of the neighbours to do it for the sake of Christmas. He will."

There was a silence. The man smiled at the Machiavellianism with which he was making use of medieval superstitions.

"All right, I'll see what can be done . . ." the old woman grumbled.

An hour later Françoise had still not telephoned.

The night passed. Next morning there was fog over the south and centre of France, and the air companies had cancelled the flights.

This suited Mullerer.

Michel rang up Aubier who, in carefully veiled terms, made it clear to him that his presence in Rome was still useful. Then he rang Damezan, where he hoped to get straight on to the conscientious Bousot: he intended to beg his friend to go and see Françoise, whose delicate soul must be inventing all sorts of unfortunate explanations for his delay in returning to her.

"Monsieur Bousot is not yet at the Centre," said the girl at the switchboard. "I can put you through to Monsieur Launay."

"No, thanks. No point in that."

He had hung up. He had suddenly felt ashamed. What a lot of ground there was to cover before one would have a sense of duty equal to that of the Master of Damezan!

And yet, he would have to cover it.

Part IV

I

THE AEROPLANE BURIED ITSELF IN THE BANK OF FOG. A PLUG of unpleasant greyish chalk pressed on the porthole. A minute of prison in the open sky. And now between the white plumes that shredded off from the underside of the cloud there appeared the morning earth, squared with flat fields and woods over which smoke trailed. They would soon be landing. Factories emerged from the ground, which began to rise like waves. Orly. Michel took out his notebook to check up his programme.

1 : Saclay. (A prospect of some useful conversations.)

2 : Try and see Muller . . .

He looked up, thinking. The first thing to do, all the same, was to see a lawyer.

3 : Ring up from the airport and make an appointment.

At sight of his papers he had been at once spared the customs formalities. Naïvely delighted at not having had to unpack the presents he was bringing home, he was rushing out into the hall when he felt a pull on his arm. Juliette was there, standing in front of him. Clearly she had come to meet him.

He stood still, looking at her in silence with a curious feeling of joy : he was less embarrassed than he would have thought.

A Juliette who had grown thinner and looked tired. To think that he had accused her of being insensitive to the attacks of age ! On her, too, anxiety and lack of sleep had done their work.

"Come, Michel," she said quietly, "treat me as a spy, if that's what you'd like. When that's over we'll go."

He would have liked to make some wounding retort, or at least to refuse to follow her. The words would not come. He stammered out some confused sentence about having to get his luggage first.

She smiled. "You can rejoin me outside. I don't suppose you've forgotten what the car looks like."

He made no reply and went off stiffly.

Suppose he gave her the slip? He despised himself for the thought. He, Michel Renoir, afraid? . . .

He saw her from some way off, on guard at the back of the car.

She was smoking, an obvious sign of uneasiness. He need only take the offensive to get the better of her.

He put the suitcases in the boot and said coldly, "The last I heard, you hated me."

If he thought he had scored a point with that sarcasm, he could not help going pale when he met Juliette's eyes.

There was a painful silence. The young woman had thrown her cigarette on the ground and was stamping it out.

"I should be grateful," she said, "if you would sit behind, since that seems to be the place you prefer when I'm driving."

She was holding the door opened to him as if to an old man. He had not the strength to protest, but got in and sat down. She took her place at the wheel. There was no sign to show that she was repeating to herself bitterly the sentence she had just uttered, recognizing—André had been only too right—how far even her way of expressing herself was becoming influenced by Michel.

The car moved off. In a flash he remembered the telephone call, so urgent just now, which he ought to have made. He fidgeted on the seat.

"And Michel junior," he said in a whisper.

The reply came sharp as a gunshot: "He's well, thanks."

A minute later, stopped by a traffic light, Juliette leaned forward to the mirror and asked him in a commonplace tone of voice if he had had a comfortable journey.

"Excellent," he growled. And, having lit a cigarette, he proceeded to take an interest in the suburban gardens.

And now neither spoke, and they seemed a long way away from each other; and yet a common memory weighed on both their minds: a certain journey home, two months ago, at night. Each of them had then sat in the same place as now in the same small car; and every second, every yard, was similarly taking them towards the cruel explanation they could no longer avoid. That lamentable last evening of their lives together.

The reminder ought to have embittered them. Quite unexpectedly, it evoked nostalgia. Even in Michel.

The car was crossing the Seine. Seagulls were wheeling in the grey atmosphere.

Was that the future—that low ceiling and confusion of forms? The precise movements of a gloved hand : the car slowly slipped into a space that was miraculously empty. The tyres grazed the pavement. They stopped.

Seeing her husband encumbered with suitcases, Juliette with perfect naturalness pressed the button at the front door of the block.

He followed her into the hall, then into the lift. She closed the gates and started it.

She lost no time in flinging open the door of the drawing-room.

"Come in."

The first word she found to say ! He was up in arms : "Don't you think it——"

"No. You haven't the right to put off this conversation."

Silenced by this, he went into the room in front of her. He noted with satisfaction that the vases had no flowers in them. She had not dared to try on him the enchantment of home !

"Sit down. Louise and the children are at my father's. I am listening."

What a ridiculous situation, to find himself just after those difficult Italian conversations, many times more at a loss in the intimacy of his own home. Michel looked about him wearily. How he would like to hate that furniture, those ornaments and that chandelier ! What meaning could those small mollycoddle things have in the world governed by the scientific laws ?

Hypocrite, in one of your suitcases you are bringing back some of the very objects you condemn, to give pleasure to a woman. Why disparage Juliette ? This setting never did express her.

"May I at least know what you're proposing to do ?" she asked with decision, as the silence got on her nerves.

He would not allow himself to play the person who does not understand. He looked her straight in the face. In his own name and that of Françoise, it was his absolute duty to match up to a courageous wife.

"Perhaps you think I'm going to beg forgiveness ?" he said to gain time. "That's not part of my programme."

But a twinge went through his heart : he had seen Juliette's lips quiver. Never yet had he been conscious of hurting a human being with such direct violence.

"I would have insisted on that at another time . . ." she murmured slowly.

The sentence remained unfinished. A presentiment came over him, as it had in front of the instruments in the control room : something painful was hovering. He was going to pay for his insults.

" . . . I've seen that woman."

"Who do you mean?"

He had shouted that reply, but he felt painfully, none the less, its full weakness.

"You know very well." She was aware that he might still contradict. "Your mistress," she said quickly, in a muffled tone.

"You dared?" he yelled.

But although he folded his arms indignantly, there was, at the back of his proud attitude, simply a man in complete disarray, a man who no longer felt strong enough, and who was flooded with shame.

"You lost your head, my poor Michel."

The bantering remark was heavy with threats, but he let it pass. It was too late now. He expected his defeat. All he now wished was to follow the lines laid down.

A curiosity, which—at other times—he would have considered so pitiable !

"My poor Michel, what wind of folly can it have been, took hold of you on the day when you had the effrontery to put our son into the hands of your mistress? Women have killed their husbands for less. That child was mine, just as much as he was yours. If not more. For you were so anxious to find your likeness in him, you even tried deforming him to prove yourself right.

"Luckily for you and for all of us, I was able to see your friend. I wish to say she is a thoroughly estimable person and was worthy of such a meeting : I think that we understood one another. I hope I shall one day be able to forget the blow I received from her through your folly."

He interrupted the speech with a gesture of his right hand.

"I too understand," he said quietly, without looking at his wife. "You asked her to leave me, and——"

His voice dried up. The confession, after all, seemed too humiliating.

Juliette attempted to come to his aid: "I assure you, she did love you."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Women say that every time."

But it was written that, even down to the details, he was to let himself be beaten that day. To her reply "Perhaps you think it's never true?" he could think of no counter.

Which did not prevent Juliette from taking the conversation back to its starting point, gloomily and calmly, just as if these things had not yet been said.

"What do you propose to do?"

Michel screwed up his face violently. That ridiculous, particularly humiliating question—why should he not simply throw it back at her? If Mullerer or Launay knew the poor specimen who lodged inside him! He longed to get up and escape. That would at least save appearances. Was he by chance, for all his disgust, incapable of allowing someone else to dictate to him a line of conduct?

"Talk to me as if we were friends," insisted Juliette, who guessed at the conflict going on in him.

"I should just like to stop thinking about all this," he said frankly. "I've a huge mass of work to do. The journey I've just come back from——"

"Really, Michel . . ." It was she who had stood up, red with fury. She took a couple of steps towards the door and then suddenly, having managed once more to control herself, returned to her place.

What was the good of protesting against the data of a problem? Human souls were not created to live, all of them, on the same wave-length.

Michel had stayed where he was. If he did not understand Juliette's reaction, he did not want to make things worse. He waited.

What words could one find that would be the right ones to

touch this man's heart? Don't the crises that tear a couple apart produce, in compensation, mysterious gleams of light?

"In the first years of our marriage," she began, "I heard you say again and again that in science setbacks increase the researcher's stature. Why should machines and building-sites have a monopoly of this? Aren't creatures of flesh and blood born under the sign of error, and therefore of progress and strife, in all fields?"

She drew her chair nearer his. They looked into each other's eyes for quite a while.

"All I want now is to admire your work," she went on. "I thought of tearing you away from Damezan and your nuclear research: I was wrong and I knew it. You have nothing now to fear. I respect even the brutal part of you. It's a woman who's speaking to you: you have hardly behaved any better to your mistress than to me, but perhaps it was necessary. I'm not suggesting to you a reconciliation on the pillow—it would leave all the shadows where they were. I think you and I ought to sign a pact of alliance, which would be finer."

He wanted to speak but she hastened to get in first.

"We'll try to live this day as if we'd already solved the problem. Don't give me an immediate answer. Each of us can think it over."

He stood up. Sooner than she would have liked. But there was a good deal of tenderness in his eyes. She knew that he was looking at her as a woman of flesh and blood, no longer as an empty screen on which to project images of fantasy.

"I accept," he said. "It won't be easy. But we ought to manage—why not?"

A silence. A moment of grace had passed over them, which would not be offered again. The man had already turned away. He was already thinking not so much of Françoise's grief as of his programme. Of a certain telephone call.

And yet, when he had already started towards the door, he turned about:

"I shall be out till this evening. Let's all dine together and I'll take you to the circus."

They smiled at each other.

"Come to think of it," he said after a second, "I can telephone

from here. Stay where you are : you know you're not in my way."

"No, Michel."

"Stay there. What I do this evening depends on this call."

Juliette sat down and picked up an old copy of *Le Monde*, but tried, in spite of herself, as she read it, to follow the telephone conversation. The name Muller, which kept recurring, seemed to ring a bell. What face lay behind it?

Michel put down the receiver. For a few seconds he remained where he was, and then, with a sudden movement, stood up, his face radiant.

"It's incredible, yet it's true," he said. "Muller, friend Muller, is on the way to getting well. The convalescence will be a long one, perhaps six months, but what does it matter, since the doctors are ready to answer for him? What they had thought was blood-poisoning was only generalized anaemia due to overwork."

Juliette went over to her husband and clasped him to her as hard as she could, kissing him on the lips. She did not understand the exact meaning of what he had said : she had not known that Muller was ill; but her feminine intuition had guessed that Michel had just escaped another drama.

"Till this evening," he murmured.

How simple everything seems to a man who is walking to the door. Even the birth of plutonium among the darkness of the rods. A man who is a real man is equal to the tasks awaiting him.

Provided he does not forget what Muller said. 'Health can't take a joke.'

"I'll ring up your father some time this morning," he shouted as he left the hall.

2

THE ORB OF THE SUN, ROUND AND RED, BECAME AWAY FROM THE horizon's pure line. The first rays glanced off the hills, striking sparks here and there from unknown windows.

Although the pale azure had buried all the stars, this beginning of a calm day was like a huge night.

Winter had set in. But can a season that marks the return of the light be called a hard season?

Michel had slowed down to gaze at the plain as it changed to yellow. Now he accelerated.

The chimney of the pile appeared.

The sun was caressing the monuments of the Centre with as much care as it gave to the *garrigues* and the vineyards. It was impossible to mistake for ruins the powerful and cheerful building-sites of *B* and *C*. How beautiful the whole thing was!

And yet, once again, all that one saw served only to bear witness to secret realities. Like the joy of living which arose in the man from the depths of his flesh and blood, the plutonium, the flower of *A*'s energy, was continually emerging from the rods within its thickness.

He opened the door and went in. A pile of correspondence was waiting for him. Mme Vauvert had placed in a conspicuous position a sheet of paper giving a summary.

Since he would be obliged to speak to her sooner or later, he rang for her at once.

She arrived immediately, notebook in hand, and with a cold, obedient expression. Her naturalness was perfect. No, she could not have been the one who had met Mme Renoir the other day.

Should he ask her if Dominique had had a good Christmas? Dangerous. The memory of Michel junior would come to the surface.

Fortunately she had the discernment to speak first.

"I didn't want to open this."

She held out a heavy yellow envelope. A registered letter. In one corner the word 'Personal' was written in large characters.

"You had the right," he said firmly, looking her straight in the eye. That was enough. To her, as well as to him, it should be quite clear that a confused period was now over.

None the less, since he wondered if the letter did not perhaps come from Françoise, he made haste to send her away.

A slip of paper pinned across the first page caught his eye.

'When you read these lines which I am writing, I shall have been dead perhaps for some days. I am going to post this letter and then I shall kill myself.'

Michel jumped and turned the pages feverishly. A large upright signature cut across the paper like a proclamation : 'Ludovic Maurier'. Yes, it was as he had thought.

He took up the telephone.

"Madame Vauvert? I have got to leave the Centre. If Monsieur Launay rings me up, I shall be back in an hour and a half."

He had not allowed himself time to read the letter. Along the dry roads, on which he would not meet anybody, he drove at full speed, careless of curves as though he might still have been able to prevent the thing from happening.

He was glad he had not telephoned the police. No use in making oneself ridiculous. Ludovic certainly had neighbours who visited him every day. Even in the depths of the country a man can't conceal his suicide for twenty-four hours. A region in which a thing like Damezan is implanted must be considered a developed region.

Were these illusions? It was better to have them in any case.

To forget that Ludovic would have warned Françoise. For the old man could not do without that. She would be by the dead man's bedside.

No! All that was finished.

The winter landscape swept past. It too was a corpse, a corpse of stones and fields which the sun's rays were chafing like flies.

And there rose the old house. It seemed on the watch.

Swaggeringly he sounded his horn. No window opened. Behind that curtain . . . He slid out of the car, pushed open the iron gate which stood ajar, and walked up the paved path that turned the corner of the building. At length the old marmalade cat, who one evening had listened to him for a long time singing the praises of fire and light, appeared and mewed piteously. Anxious to quiet him, Michel bent down to stroke him, and just avoided being rewarded by a scratch. The animal was already running down the garden to the freedom of the *garriques*.

The man shivered. When he reached the white door he refrained from knocking. He opened it and went straight in to the hall.

A sinister smell told him the truth. He was the first to arrive.

Pressing a handkerchief to his nose he made quickly for the room.

Clad in dark corduroy, Ludovic Maurier's powerful body with its jaw smashed lay on a mattress that had been placed on the bare stone floor. Blood had spurted against the wall. There was a dark stagnant pool on the floor, in which lay two revolvers. Was there any point in his having, one day not long ago, made all that speech about the beavers?

In the second half of the twentieth century, at a time when technical progress was soaring, had men been unable to think of prouder reactions than this? And were there still solitudes so deep that a neighbour's suicide could remain undiscovered?

With his heart full of contempt he gazed at the disfigured, lamentable, dirty face and, at the same time, a strange tenderness began to take hold of him. If it was now too late to close the long eyelids even halfway over the swollen whites of those eyes, he would have liked to show that this death concerned him, by washing that skin and unsticking those moustaches. His thoughts kept telling him that he had some responsibility for this shameful death. He was afraid his fingers would be too clumsy.

The infirmary people had joined the hands of the huge fair-haired workman. Ludovic's body was too stiff. So much for a superstition!

Yes, believing in the existence of the soul gave Boussot a secret strength, but it was more glorious to face suffering without these illusions. Ludovic would never have allowed his dead body to form part of a piece of blackmail.

There was nothing to do now but inform the police.

His eyes wandered about the large low-ceilinged room, in which, day after day, during several centuries, a series of families, and then a solitary man, had carried on the peasant way of life. Then he received a shock which almost bent him double. There was no doubt of it: the photograph next to the heavy copper crucifix which Ludovic had placed on a stool was that of Françoise.

He made quickly for the door.

But outside he saw his car. He would have had to turn it about and suddenly the manoeuvre seemed to him too complicated. He

took his place at the wheel and started off in the direction laid down by things. He denied that, in doing so, he would be lying to Juliette. She had exacted no promise from him. Involved situations cannot be unravelled in a few minutes.

The landscape had always been more beautiful in the neighbourhood of the lonely house. The winter sunshine sowed its rays over the still land. Isolated on a rocky rise, a cypress which seemed to have been planted there since the beginning of the world, eternal like the substance of the sun and the sky, greeted his passing as a return.

As he walked across the fallow land with great strides, he repeated to himself that he was not behaving dishonourably. Nor had Françoise ever given him a sign that she wished to break with him.

He was forced to submit to the evidence: the sound of the knocker aroused no movement inside the house. All the shutters were closed—at eleven in the morning! He shook the door.

The thought that Françoise might have killed herself came into his mind. But he chased it away. He suspected he was not being sincere—he wanted to give himself a pretext for forcing the door! A man who has held discussions with Mullerer and worthily sustained the national interest must show more dignity.

He must abandon this house for ever, like a dead pile.

The old woman had already recognized him as the madman who had rung up the *Gaîté Champêtre* from Rome. Dumb-founded now by what he had just said on the telephone she busied herself ostentatiously with odd jobs in the café, but Michel had no intention of being drawn into conversation. He had sat down at a table. While he waited for the police he read Ludovic's letter.

The old farmer had raked over his decision to die, like a piece of ground. The out-of-date style was both absurd and forceful—it suggested the first bicycles, the first motor cars. At the top of page 1, like the local councillor he must surely have been at some time, he had carefully marked: '*To Captain Michel Renoir, from Ludovic Maurier of the Maquis.*' And then, twice underlined: '*Object: to explain my intentions.*' Four pages written by hand, in straight lines like vine plants.

The words 'to protest' and 'a protest' had come again and again from the thick nib of that insister on the absolute—a strangely ringing reminder of the religion he had inherited on his mother's side. Though his life seemed firmly clamped to his body, he said, he refused to become its slave and he intended to resist destiny. The starting of Damezan, his son's treachery, the departure of Françoise and Captain Renoir's deceitfulness had been too many blows for one man, and he was renouncing what was only a game for dupes.

Captain Renoir, who had sworn not to tell anyone who had stolen the detector, had not kept his word, for he had had them come and collect it. He had claimed that Damezan was not making bombs, whereas . . . 'See attached article' said a note, pompously.

Michel went on reading. Ludovic wrote contemptuously that he could have shot him down like a rabbit. Two well-aimed bullets have a certain effect even on a man of Damezan! On the entreaties of Mademoiselle Romieu he had consented to be good; but nothing for nothing: the Captain would remember his old friend of the Maquis. He would mend his ways. He would start on an active struggle against the Spirit of Evil, which was poisoning our time.

The scientist closed his eyes for several seconds. Had Maurier been mad? Such a verdict would be meaningless in a time when apocalypse-mongers assumed power over the fate of nations.

He unfolded a press cutting—no doubt the one to which the note referred. He smiled wryly. It was a long analysis of Operation Ricochet.

Mullerer, he thought, if your scruples weren't merely propaganda, look at this and rejoice. There are still Frenchmen who kill themselves because the prospect of atomic bombardments outrages them!

In deference to the dead man—after all, he owed him that!—he seized the document in his hand and began to read it with scrupulous attention.

Stealthily he examined the old woman. There was someone who would yell the roof off if she knew the contents of this bit of paper. It was wrong to let such idiocies be printed. And yet...

It was all too true that Hiroshima and Nagasaki had left a progeny whose name was Legion.

The technicians had begged matter to display its vices : from now on, always, it was ready to join the dance, to the rhythm of a pitiless vendetta. A flick of the wrist, a button pressed by a placid hand, and the army of the potentialities of horror would rush out into the light.

Operation Ricochet—the name had a stupidly cheerful ring, but there was all too much truth in it.

What words could fail to be ridiculous?

The Americans had been determined to have their exercises in civil defence against atomic bombs on a very large scale, and now the result was going beyond expectations : after Operation Ricochet the Stockholm alerts seemed not worth mentioning.

The verdict was this : in the first twenty-four hours of another war, the H-bombs that would fall on the principal cities in the United States would kill or mutilate fifty million human beings.

A fine subject for moments of relaxation !

With his elbow Michel had knocked the envelope off the table on to the floor. A paper fell out of it.

Another sheet covered with the old man's handwriting.

THIS IS MY LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT.

The most amazing thing was still to come.

In the correct terms, Ludovic Maurier was leaving all his worldly possessions to the Damezan Centre.

Was this an act of superior irony indulged in by the victor? Or was it the low vengeance of a peasant anxious to disinherit his son?

Michel had no hesitation. He tore up the paper.

3

THE STRONG RAY OF SUNSHINE WHICH CAME THROUGH THE window insistently picked out Launay's hands, which he had placed flat on his desk. The sight fascinated Michel. It seemed like an image from the 'Golden Legend'. The mysterious bird that singles out the elect.

One must keep one's eyes and understanding open, he thought.

In the new age that is beginning, human will-power will retain all its prestige.

Launay's hands, combining male force with feminine patience.

"I have been on the telephone to Aubier," the Director continued. "I do not allow myself to intervene in the relations between you two, but I am aware—since indeed he has told me in so many words—that he is extremely satisfied with your Roman mission."

Michel lowered his eyes. His journey belonged to the past. The present was the death of Ludovic. And the doctor's diagnosis, which said that Michel was overworked and must take a month's rest. (He would have to see if the Service would allow of such a holiday. Perhaps, in spite of everything . . .) And also the letter from Rabaud—a complete surprise.

The colleague of Guerroy and Perreyve had written these heart-warning sentences :

'I should like to submit to you an idea, and then to go into it with you on the spot. I am afraid I shall raise a smile when I tell you—what is the truth—that I believe in your own personal future; but you will at least be aware that I believe in the future of the nuclear sciences.'

'My constituency is in a part of the country that has many advantages, and only needs a small impulse to get it going. I wonder if, within the context, the French programme for developing—'

So even that evening at Dr Laffon's had not been wasted : one more outsider was paying homage to the invisible. Old Chayriguès had not been wrong in having a high opinion of Rabaud.

The ringing of the telephone interrupted these reflections. When Michel raised his eyes, Launay held the receiver in his hand and there was a bitter expression on his face. At the other end of the line a man's voice was talking fast. The Director had not said a word.

"Another delay," he said quietly at last to Michel, as he put the receiver down. "The firm of Gérard Estienne, which had given me assurances, now asks me not to count on it . . . Nothing but to accept facts and go on hoping. All the same, the situation's

improving on *B* site, because Calex and Nord-Machines have gone back to work."

A bright gleam lit up Michel's features. One day, not far ahead, he felt sure, he would be present at the starting up of another reactor. He pulled out his notebook. That afternoon he must ring up dear Martineau at Saclay, to rejoice with him over the prospect.

Was the interview at an end? Launay stood up.

But he came over to Michel and, gently and firmly, held his hand between his own.

"I congratulate you," he said, "on the confidence you now radiate."

The Director was alone again. He had three telephone calls to make, and yet he did not go back to his place. Surely a real professional conscience may sometimes, like eloquence, mock itself? He stood with his back to the closed door and his eyes fixed on the far distance.

By certain things he had said and the tone in which he had said them, he would have revealed to Michel Renoir that he was informed of various things, but this had been calculated.

Michel Renoir would always remain ignorant of how far the Director of Damezan thought fit to be informed about men's private lives.

Would there ever be a time when scientists would not need to be pricked on still more in their strife against the craftiness of matter, which denies them its riches with invincible obstinacy?

To make and use plutonium—a splendid task; but those who carried it out in the name of their brothers had some strangely harsh duties.

Desire as they may to live completely ordinary lives, it is absolutely impossible that they should be mediocre men.

It might be all right for the pilots of supersonic aircraft to lead carpet-slipper lives off duty, but not for them.

Nobility of soul and constant care will be my realm from now on.

Blessed those who have not seen but have believed . . .

Launay walked over to his desk, opened a drawer and picked

up a file. In it there was everything the international press had said about Damezan in the last week.

A cutting from a Belgian illustrated paper lay on top. The piece was signed André Thomas-Laborde. The Director allowed himself the right to re-read it :

'A famous writer has said that the happiness of men is to be found in the small valleys. A charming phrase, and an apt one.

'But take a walk round Damezan, question the technicians in charge there, and, if you are willing to clear your own mind, you will begin to see a different truth: in our time the greatness of man will tend to take refuge on plateaux.

'Remember, it is a geneticist who is saying this . . .'

For a fraction of a second Launay smiled, then he closed the file and put it away.

For us, now, the problems !

And while, in the depths of *A*, millions of atoms of plutonium came into existence and freed themselves, the Director took up his telephone and prepared to win another engagement.

Before his eyes, though they were staring at the desk and were filled with the solemn colour of its wood, a series of images passed—the tempestuous days to come.

Would he always have the strength to go on giving orders? Would not the era now beginning be dominated by mistrust and secrecy? Would not the loneliness become terrifying? . . . To lose one's honour—wasn't that the real danger?

A small precise voice had just answered down the line. Calm and informative. The task commands. No place for useless despair. Honour will play its part in winning through.